As none of you know Javanese I will give you
all my easyfree translation of the
old fabulist's parable
—James Joyce

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SARATCHANDRA CHATTERJEE, born in a Bengal village in September 1876, spent early youth in Bihar, subsequently tramping through different parts of India Later spent a few years in Burma Published his first story at the age of thirtyfive, winning instant recognition Bengal's most popular and perhaps most prolific novelist Spent his later years partly in Calcutta and partly in the country Died, after an illness, on 14th January 1937, in Calcutta

SRIKANTA

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A WANDERER

SARATCHANDRA CHATTERJEE

INDIAN PUBLISHERS
BENARES

Saratchandra Chatterji

By

Ranee Chanda

[*With acknowledgment to Visva-Bharati Quarterly*]

INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult to characterise Saratchandra Chatterji as a crusader or even a novelist of social protest, yet it is undoubtedly true that his books deal largely with social problems, the reader is aware that deep down in his consciousness somewhere the author has a 'cause' It has been said that Saratchandra Chatterjee was a novelist with a 'deep and intense social conscience,' it is the voice of this conscience that dominates his novels, which concern themselves with social injustices, particularly those directed against women Convinced that woman, especially in the Hindu society of his day, was the worst sufferer at the hands of society and the victim of it's cynical lack of understanding, Saratchandra was one of the few writers of fiction in India who recognised the personality of woman as a complete social entity, and had the courage to follow up the development of that personality vis a vis *society to its logical conclusion Indeed, even outside fiction which was his* metier, *Saratchandra wrote an essay (originally published anonymously) entitled* NARIR MULYA *('What Price Woman?') in which he made an impassioned yet closely reasoned plea for the recognition of woman's right of self-determination and the moral and spiritual value of her personality*

Saratchandra Chatterjee was born on the 15*th September* 1876, *in Devanandapur, a small Bengal village His father was a poor man, and his childhood was passed in such poverty that his education was neglected He inherited from his father, however, a keen and restless mind and a love of literature His early youth was spent in Bihar Later he tramped over different parts of India, gathering a harvest of experience that was later to enrich his novels At the age of seventeen he tried his hand at short stories which were greatly appreciated by his friends and acquaintances He does not, however, appear to have continued writing, and certainly did not appear in print till eighteen years later In* 1904 *he went off to Rangoon (the descriptionn of a deck passage in* PATHER DABI *is unforgettable), becoming a clerk in a Government office*

Saratchandra was thirtyfive when, urged by some of his old literary friends who had started a monthly journal, he published his first story He won instant recognition, however, and his rise to fame was phenomenal During the next twentyfive years he wrote more than thirty novels as well as short stories and occasional essays Several of his works roused bitter controversy and brought on him the wrath of the literary critics, but his popularity was immense and unquestionable,

his books ran into numerous editions (the largest number for a single book being twentythree during the author's lifetime) and one novel PATHER DABI ('The struggle for Rights', for many years under a government ban as subversive writing), sold one edition on the day of publication Many of his novels and stories have been dramatised and successfully produced on stage and screen, most of his works have been translated into the major Indian languages and been as popular as in Bengali, in which his popularity is undiminished after his death, which occurred in January 1937 at Calcutta

The content of Saratchandra's books is primarily social, and his plots gravitate round social injustice, against a characteristically Bengali background, with its Zamindari system, its absentee landlords with mediæval extravagances and feudal morals, its custom-trammelled village life with its petty squabbles, heartless intrigues and the tyranny of superstition, and, uncrushed by this dead superstructure, the charm and simple dignity of the common villager's life At the same time we get pictures of Bengali society as it exists outside Bengal Saratchandra's keen observation and sensitive imagination missed little during his peregrinations and his pictures of the Bengali cut off from his own milieu, for example in the Bengali groups and colonies in Burma, are powerful and convincing Cut off from the restraints of his own environment, the Bengali in Burma was different, and amongst Saratchandra's characters we find not only creatures sunk in the deepest mire of depravity but also men and women reaching to unexpected heights of moral endeavour.

Contact with different levels of society and human character seeking expression in different environments, while it gave a keener edge to Saratchandra's sensitive imagination, also gave a certain detatchment to his wide sympathies and restraint to his emotions, though one can still observe his portrayals being influenced by his emotional and intelletual predilections With his women characters, especially, Saratchandra identifies himself, other characters becoming secondary His characterisations are presumably generally based on actual acquaintance with a few remarkable women, intelligent, clear-sighted, self-reliant, and passionate in realising the needs of a strong personality this type, with variations, recurs in his work

It would not be an unfair generalisation to assert that the main theme of the majority of Saratchandra's stories is the essential dignity and incorruptibility of woman However lowly and degrading the conditions of her life, woman, in Saratchandra's eyes, retains an innate purity and graciousness, and a capacity for self-effacement and sacrifice that reveal the strength of her character and the nobility of her soul In his characterisation woman might be socially emancipated (voluntarily

or involuntarily), or she might be completely conservative in outlook, accepting man-made society without protest or struggle, recognising male insensitiveness and self-seeking merely as an unpalatable reality and resigning herself to suffering; or, again, she might be more combative and self-assertive, yet the emphasis is never on any direct struggle against the dominance of the male as such but only on the innate necessity of following her instincts regardless of the antagonism of the social pattern. And, against the background of this compelling necessity, the male inevitably shows up selfish and mediocre.

Saratchandra had the courage of his convictions. Demanding freedom of development for woman's personality, he followed that development unfalteringly and without bias to its logical conclusion. Earlier novelists who had depicted the woman who dared to follow the urge of her personality invariably provided appropriate punishment in disillusionment, death, remorse or despair. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore felt it their duty to work out the karma *of the 'erring' wife in terms of the social code—witness their treatment of the 'triangle' in* CHANDRASHEKHAR *and* NASHTA NIDA *('Broken Nest') or* GHARE-BAIRE *('At Home and Abroad') respectively. Comparison of these works with Saratchandra's* SHESH PRASHNA *('The Final Query') and* GRIHA-DAHA *('A House Afire') is interesting. In the former Kamal, who is frankly sceptical of the ethics of marriage, unites her life with a succession of lovers, but there is hardly any conflict in her mind as to the simultaneous claim of two or more men on herself. In the latter, the woman is torn with conflicts oscillating between the husband Mahim and the lover Suresh, but finally leaves the husband for good, suggesting that her personality has priority over her wifehood. This book was written shortly after the last war, when the question of women's rights became prominent in the political arena of many countries. Saratchandra arrived, as very few of his countrymen had arrived, at the vision of woman as a living personality, not a mere cog, albeit necessary, in the social machine: in other words he discovered that she had a soul.*

It will be apparent that Saratchandra regarded social immorality as largely, if not wholly, the product of social conditions themselves; on the victims of these conditions he therefore lavished all the warm sympathy of his sensitive and understanding heart, supplementing his actual experience of the social milieu *of Bengal with a wide reading of sociological literature. From this it is a natural step to an all-embracing sympathy for the underdog—the unfortunates, the dispossessed, the misunderstood and the oppressed, even for the tramp, the vagabond and the waster*

His later writings also reflected India's struggle for independence, and had a strong nationalistic content Saratchandra's canvas, however, is not large, being limited generally to the Hindu middle classess of Bengal, which were the classes he knew—and knew well He was a keen observer and a penetrating critic of social injustice as existing in these classes, his criticism not being that of an outsider but of one who feels as his own the pain and poignancy of the wound he exposes to his readers

From the point of view of craftsmanship and style, Saratchandra owed a great deal to the novels and stories of Tagore—a debt he freely acknowledged He learned from the elder writer some of his delicacy of touch, his consummate artistry of language, his psychological insight into situations he lacks Tagore's finesse and his appreciation of artistic values or possibilities, though he is closer to human nature, human desires and human suffering In the manner in which Saratchandra weaves his experience into a fabric, giving it dramatic form and significance, or imbues his characters with emotional value, and in the significance he finds in stress, suffering and apparent frustration and defeat, in his respect for human dignity, love and affection even amongst the lowliest, he stands in a class by himself, dominating as from a pedestal a large number of admiring emulators in several Indian languages

SRIKANTA, *which is generally understood to be largely autobiographical, is one of the most characteristic of Saratchandra's novels, though it can hardly be said to be his best It originally appeared serially, its immense popularity causing it to run into a sequence of four parts, only the first of which is here presented in translation Though rather episodic in character and lacking in form as a novel, it is revealing and characteristic not only of the author's technique and philosophy but also of the life of the classes it deals with As in all his work the women stand out, and the hold that Annada had, and probably still has, on the imagination of Bengal's youth (and even her writers) can hardly be over-estimated*

The translation is faithful, but not literal, being as close to the original as possible, consistent with the demands of English usage It is hoped that it will bring the foreign reader closer to Indian life and the Indian reader closer to the life of Bengal

K C S

INDRANATH

WHAT MEMORIES AND THOUGHTS CROWD INTO my mind, as, at the threshold of the afternoon of my wandering life, I sit down to write the story of its morning hours!

From my childhood to the present day, the invariable comment of my kinsmen and others on my life and conduct has always been a 'Fie!' or 'Shame!' Nor have I ever had the temerity to challenge this estimate as anything but just and fair. But to-day, as I sit down to unravel the memories of long ago and to investigate how even the morning of my life came to have a prefatory 'Shame!' affixed to it, I am suddenly assailed by an unwonted doubt. Perhaps this degradation into which, by universal report my life has sunk, is not, after all, necessarily so low as my contemporaries have always thought? May it not be, so the doubt shapes itself in my mind, that those whom God summons to the heart of his wonderful creation, are not the people who have had the opportunity to shine at school examinations, nor those gentlemen who sweep grandly through life in a coach and pair with pomp and retinue, ending up with the flourish of a volume of 'Memoirs'? Though Providence perhaps does endow her favourite children with a certain amount of sense, it is not what men of the world could call sound common-sense. The desires and curious longings which consume them are so strange and incongruous, their passion for experience so wayward and fantastic, that a description would probably evoke unmeasured derision from the wise. History does not record how the Bad Boy grows up, unloved and uncared for, lured into evil by its powerful attraction, knocked about by painful experiences, till one day at last, heavy with the weight of universal contumely and his own evil repute, he passes on into the silence and oblivion of the land without a name.

But no more of this Let me tell you just what I have to tell, though that, you must know, is easier said than done Travelling is one thing and writing about it quite another Anyone with a pair of legs can travel, but not every one who has hands can write Another difficulty with me is that God has not blest me with any imagination or poetic power I see merely what these prosaic eyes of mine can see to me a tree is but a tree and a hill nothing but a hill Looking at water I see nothing less commonplace than water, I could stare at clouds till my neck ached and see nothing but shreds of cloud—no trace or semblance of some one's dark masses of hair (as a poet should), no, not so much as a single hair I have tried gazing at the moon with similar assiduity, but it has brought me no image of a face One so utterly bereft of vision should never attempt imaginative writing All I can do is to tell the plain truth in plain language And that is what I have set out to do in this story

Before I describe how my vagabond life began, I must introduce the person who initiated me into its intoxicating joys His name was Indranath We first met at a football match Whether he is still alive, I do not know, it is many years since he passed out of my life Early one morning he left his home and his people - everything he possessed, taking nothing but the clothes he wore he never came back But I shall never forget the day I first met him

There was a football match between Hindu and Moslem students on our school playground It was growing dark, and I stood tensely watching the game All of a sudden came the sound of blows and cries of 'After him ! Catch him ! Down with him !' The game had turned into a riot In two or three minutes the whole crowd had melted away, leaving me standing there in a daze I woke to reality only when the handle of an umbrella came down on my back and cracked with the impact Two or three other umbrellas were raised above my head, I was surrounded by five or six Musalman boys

Another umbrella fell on me, and yet another Then somebody made his way at lightning speed through the human wall around me and stood by my side It was Indranath

He was a dark boy, with a finely chiselled nose, a broad, well-modelled forehead, and a few pock marks on his face Though older he was about my height "Don't be afraid," he said "come right behind me out of this" The courage and chivalrous spirit of the boy, though uncommon, might not perhaps be so unique, but there was not the least doubt that he had the most extraordinary arms I am not speaking merely of physical strength, his arms were long enough to reach below his knees That was Indranath's great advantage in a scuffle, his opponent could never dream that this short young man would suddenly shoot out an arm four feet long and land a fist of proportionate size on an unwary nose

In about two minutes I had come out, following his lead, to a comparatively safe place "Run," said Indra without further comment As I began to run, I asked, "And you ?" But he answered rudely, "Run, you fool don't argue"

But, fool or no fool, I remember distinctly, I turned round all of a sudden and said, "I won't !"

Who hasn't had a whacking in one's boyhood ? But I, a village boy who had come to live with a town aunt for my education, had never before participated in such organised, mass beatings, nor had seen two umbrella sticks get broken on my back Yet I could not flee alone

"You won't, eh ?" asked Indra, looking at my face "Do you mean to wait till you get a good drubbing, my boy ? There, they are coming from that side Aw, come on, let us run"

That was a thing that I could do to perfection When we came upon the main thoroughfare, it was already dark Shops were lit, and the municipal kerosene lamps on the road glimmerred weakly from their iron posts, one here and the next one unconscionably far We had left our assailants far behind

When Indra spoke, it was in the most natural voice imaginable My throat had become dry, but I had not even once heard him breathing hard. It was as if nothing had happened "What is your name ?" he asked

"Srikanta"

"Srikanta, good," and, thrusting his hand into his pocket, he brought out a handful of dry leaves He put some of them into his mouth and gave me the rest, saying, "I've given them a good hammering Chew these"

"What are they?"

"*Siddhi*"*

Greatly surprised, I said, "*siddhi*? I don't chew *siddhi*" Indranath looked still more surprised "You don't?" he said "What an ass you are! Just chew them and you'll get tight Chew them and then swallow them"

Not knowing at that age the fascination of intoxication, I declined his offer and returned the leaves to him He put them into his mouth, chewed and swallowed

"Well then, smoke a cigarette" He brought two cigarettes and a box of matches out of his pocket and, giving me one, lit the other himself Then, holding it in a curious manner between both his palms, as one would smoke a *chillum*,† he began to pull vigorously There were people all around, I asked timidly, "What if they see you smoking?"

"What if they do?" he answered, "Everybody knows" He disappeared round the corner of the street, smoking with a nonchalant air, leaving a profound impression on my mind

To-day I can recall many a detail of the happenings of that day But I cannot remember whether I liked that strange boy or inwardly despised him for having publicly chewed *siddhi* and smoked cigarettes

A month had passed since the day of the match The night was dark and warm not a leaf stirred We had all had our beds made on the roof, it was near midnight, yet no one could get to sleep All at once the music of a flute floated to our ears What sweetness that simple *Ramprasadi*‡ tune scattered in the darkness! It was a tune I had

* Hemp (*Cannabis sativa*)

† An Indian pipe made of clay

‡ Ramprasad was a folk-poet of the later eighteenth century

heard times without number, but I did not know, coming from a reed, it could be so sweet, so entrancing To the south-east of the house was a large grove of mango and jack trees, lush with neglect, with only a thin cattle track showing in the dank growth, the music seemed to be wafted from that direction

My aunt sat up and addressing her eldest son, asked, "Nabin, is that the Rays' boy, Indra ?"

Yes, they all knew the nocturnal flute player Nabin answered, "Who but that good-for-nothing could play such music or would enter that jungle ?"

"Then it is he Is he really coming through the Gosains' grove ?"

Nabin replied that he was Perhaps my aunt felt a tremor of fear as she thought of the thick jungle in that impenetrable darkness She asked, "But why doesn't his mother forbid him ? Any number of people have been bitten by snakes in that grove Why must the boy go into that jungle so late at night ?"

"Well," said my cousin with a laugh, "that is the short cut between his part of the village and this that's all Do you think, mother, that he who has no fear and no care for his life will come by the roundabout way ? All he wants is to come quickly, it matters little whether on the way he has to cross rivers or meet snakes or face tigers !"

"What a dare-devil !" said my aunt, and with a sigh lapsed into silence The sound of the flute grew gradually clear and then slowly fainter till it died away in the distance

That was Indranath The first day I met him I had thought, "If only I could be as strong and fight like him !" And this night the one thought that kept revolving in my mind till I fell asleep was, "Would that I could play on the bamboo flute like Indranath !"

But how could I strike up an acquaintance with him ? He was older and was not even at school I had heard that, being aggrieved by the headmaster's perverse decision to put the 'dunce cap' on his head, he had contemptuously scaled the railings of the school-compound

and had gone home, never to return Long afterwards I learnt from his own mouth that his offence had been very trivial indeed It had been a habit with the up-country Pundit to doze off in his class-room On one of these occasions Indranath with a pair of scissors had cut the straggling Brahminical top-knot on the Pundit's head Not much harm had been done for the teacher, on his return home, had found the lost tuft inside the pocket of his own long coat Indranath had failed to understand why the Pundit had been unable to forgive him and had even made a complaint to the headmaster He knew, however, that for one who had left school by the original procedure of scaling the railings, the school-gates hardly remained open in welcome Nor did he greatly care In spite of the efforts of the numerous elders in the house, he never turned his face school-wards again He exchanged his pen for a paddle, spending whole days on the Ganges in a canoe He had a small dinghy of his own in rain and in storm, by day and by night, he was always to be seen alone in his boat Suddenly, one day, he would drift down the river sitting motionless at the helm, and for a fortnight he would not be heard of again It was when he was starting on one of these expeditions that I had an opportunity of cementing our acquaintance

But those who are my well-wishers will ask, 'Your conduct was highly unworthy of you You were a poor man's son and had come from your village for education What led you to mix with him and what made you so keen on his company? If you had conducted yourself as you should have—'

And so on and so forth Hundreds of people have admonished me thus and I have also questioned myself on these lines a thousand times But it is impossible to answer such questions, nor is it easy to say what I could have become or achieved if my conduct had been otherwise Only He who knows all can say why I preferred the company of that luckless boy to that of anybody else, why every fibre of my being yearned towards that vagabond of evil repute

I well remember that day It had rained the whole day and was still raining. The July sky was lowering and a clammy darkness had fallen before it was fairly evening My cousins and I had taken

our meals early and sat down to our books according to our invariable custom on a bed spread out in the sitting-room, to study by the light of a castor-oil lamp Outside, my uncle was taking his evening nap on a canvas cot at one end of the verandah, and at the other end old Ramkamal Bhatchaj, after his usual dose of opium, was smoking a *hookah*, his eyes closed in the semi-gloom The up-country servants in the portico outside were reading Tulsidas's Ramayana in a slow sing-song, and we three cousins were attending to our studies in silence under the strict supervision of *Mej-da* *

Chhot-da†, Jatin-da, and I were students of the third and fourth classes, and our Mej-da of grave aspect, having twice failed in the Entrance Examination, now with solemn application and profound attention, prepared for it for the third time Under his iron rule none of us could waste a single moment in idle distractions Our study time was from 7-30 to 9 P M In order that we might not disturb Mej-da's serious studies by talking during this period, every day, as a preliminary measure, he used to cut twenty or thirty small paper squares somewhat like railway tickets, and mark them 'Out', 'Expectoration', 'Blowing the nose', 'Thirst', and so on If Jatin-da wanting to blow his nose, he would put up the proper ticket, Mej-da would sign it and endorse 'allowed from 8-33 to 8-34½', indicating the time during which the nose-blowing was to be accomplished As soon as Jatin-da went out with the ticket in his hand, Chhot-da would present a ticket for 'Expectoration', but, Mej-da would signify disapproval by a written refusal In consequence, Chhot-da would sit still and grave for two minutes, and then bring up a petition for "Thirst" This time Mej-da would accord sanction, writing "Allowed from 8-41 to 8-47" As soon as Chhot-da went out beaming, Jatin-da returned and presented his ticket to Mej-da Mej-da compared the time noted on the ticket

* The second eldest brother or cousin 'Da' is a contraction of 'Dada' which means elder brother

† The youngest elder brother or cousin

with the clock, took out a book, and pasted down the ticket on one of its pages All the requisite materials for these varied operations used to be kept close at hand At the end of the week, if on some occasions we had over-stayed our leave or if our requests for tickets had been too frequent, we were called upon to explain

Thus, under Mej-da's extremely vigilant and orderly government, neither we nor he wasted a single instant of our allotted time for study Every night when we proceeded to bed after such intense application to books the Goddess *Saraswati** herself must certainly have escorted us as far as our bedroom door It is easy to imagine now with what laurels we returned home next day from school But it was Mej-da's peculiar misfortune that his examiners could not appreciate his true worth In spite of his overpowering love of learning and such an exacting sense of responsibility as regards the true value of time, they went on "ploughing" him year after year Such is the blind judgment of fate ! But let that pass What will it profit us to inquire further into his sorrows now ?

On that particular night the four of us sat immersed in our books in the mild lamplight while outside on the verandah the two old men drowsed in the deepening gloom

As soon as Chhot-da returned from outside I began to feel parched with an uncotrollable thirst Consequently I presented my application in the prescribed form and waited expectant Mej-da opened the book pasted over with tickets, and bent over it in rigorous scrutiny to see whether my thirst was lawful or not, that is, to what extent I had satisfied my thirst on the days immediately preceding

All at once there was a deep growl, close to my back, and simultaneously deafening shrieks of alarm from Chhot-da and Jatin-da, "*Hai*, I am killed !" Before I could turn my head and see who or what it was that was killing them, Mej-da raised his head, gave a terrible unearthly cry, shot out his legs with lightning rapidity and overturned the

*Goddess of learning

All of a sudden, Kishori Singh, the wrestler, said, "There, he's sitting there !", and with one bound he flew to the verandah, followed by an eager pushing, jostling, elbowing throng, each one anxious to squeeze himself into the verandah, and none able to wait for a moment There was a pomegranate tree at one end of the courtyard Beneath its bushy branches a big animal was plainly seen, yes, it was very like a tiger In the twinkling of an eye the verandah became empty and the sitting-room was filled with a panic-stricken crowd From the midst of this crowd came the excited voice of my uncle, "Get some spears—bring the guns !" By guns he meant an old match-lock affair, with a ramrod, belonging to our neighbour Gagan Babu There was certainly no objection to getting it, but who was to bring it ? The pomegranate tree was close to the first gate and there the tiger was sitting quietly The up-country servants had grown dumb, nor did one hear any offer of help from the neighbours who had come to see the fun

While we were in this predicament Indra appeared suddenly, Heaven knows from where Perhaps he was passing along the road in front, and had come in on hearing the hubbub In an instant a hundred voices cried, "Look out ! there's a tiger ! Come away at once, you foolish boy !"

Startled at first, he ran into the verandah But when, shortly after, he had heard everything, he took a lantern and went down, nothing daunted, to look for the tiger

Behind the windows upstairs were the ladies in breathless silence, calling fervently to the Goddess Durga as they watched this reckless boy My aunt broke into hysterical sobs Below, standing in a close phalanx, the up-country servants offered encouragement to Indra, and hinted they would come down too if only they could secure any weapons

When Indra had had a good, long look at the beast, he said, "Dwarika Babu, this is no tiger" The words were hardly out of his mouth when the royal Bengal tiger put his forepaws together and broke into a human cry, protesting in the clearest Bengali, "No, sir, I am no tiger I am neither tiger nor bear I am Chinath the mimic"

Indra laughed aloud Mr Bhatchaj, wooden slippers in hand, was the first to advance towards the masquerader "You rascal," he cried, "can't you find any other place to frighten people out of their wits ?"

In righteous wrath my uncle ordered, "Drag the scoundrel here by the ears !"

Kishori Singh, who had seen the intruder first, had the natural right to carry out this order, so he seized the wretched fellow's ears and dragged him ruthlessly into the centre of the courtyard

Mr Bhatchaj, in the heat of his indignation, dealt a blow with his wooden slippers on the back of the 'tiger', and began to stutter in execrable Hindustani, "I have got all my bones broken on account of this rascal I have been beaten to pulp by this set of up-country roughs "

The mimic Chinath's home was at Baraset whence he came once a year to earn a few rupees by his profession Only the day before he had come to our house disguised as Narad, the divine ascetic minstrel, and had treated us to his songs He now fell at the feet of Mr Bhatchaj, and then of my uncle He said that he too had been frightened by Mej-da's over-turning the lamp and starting a terrible uproar, and had run and hidden himself behind the trees, thinking that he would show his performance later when the confusion had subsided , but events had taken such a turn that he lacked the courage to show himself His entreaties however, had no effect My uncle was adamant and showed no sign of relenting

Suddenly my aunt from her vantage point upstairs threw a rejoinder, "It is lucky for you it wasn't a real tiger or a bear, for you're a brave lot, you and your stalwart darwans ! Let the poor fellow alone, and don't forget to send those up-country good-for-nothings about their business The whole lot of you haven't got half the guts a little boy has !"

My uncle did not deign to reply, assuming an aspect meant to suggest that it would be the easiest thing in the world to refute the charge if he were so minded, but that it would be beneath his dignity

to give weight to the remarks of a mere woman In a still more wrathful tone he ordered, "Cut off his tail !" Chinath's long tail, composed of straw wrapped in coloured cloth, was then cut off and he was turned out of the house, while my aunt, who saw everything, simply remarked, "Yes, keep it for yourself you will find it useful "

"Well, Srikanta," said Indra to me as we stood together apart from the crowd, "so this is where you live "

"Yes," said I, "but where were you going so late to-night ?"

"So late !" he answered, laughing "Why, it's only just evening I am going to my dinghy to catch fish Will you come ?"

"In your boat ?" I asked timidly "On such a dark night as this ?"

He laughed again "Cheer up, that's just what makes it great fun And, besides, you can't catch fish, you know, except in the dark Can you swim ?"

"Rather !"

"Come along, then," and he caught hold of my hand "I can't row so far up-stream alone I've been looking for some one who would not be afraid "

I felt flattered Holding his hand I went with him silently out to the road I could hardly believe that I was really going on a fishing expedition in a canoe Nor did I then realise the full force of the attraction which made me defy the stern discipline of our house and come out on the road in the deepening gloom We soon came to the path leading to the awful jungle of the Gosains, and I followed Indra through it like one mesmerised till we came to the bank of the Ganges at the jungle's edge

It was a steep, gravelly bank Over our heads spread the branches of an old *pipal* tree, in the ghostly silence suggesting the features of some demon of darkness, while forty feet below, in concentrated gloom the vast surge swollen by mid-July rain chafed and spumed against the bank, swirled up into whirlpools, and then swept madly past I could dimly see Indra's little canoe tied below From above, it looked like a tiny sauce-boat, dashed helplessly against the bank by the force of the mighty current I was not altogether a coward, but

when Indra pointed to a rope below and said, "That rope is tied to the boat hold fast to it by your feet and slide down carefully Mind, one slip and there'll be nothing left of you," my heart gave a jump "Can't—" was the word that leapt to my brain But I only asked, "And what about you ?"

"As soon as you are in I shall untie the rope and get down myself Don't be afraid, there are lots of roots and grass by which I can hold on "

Without another word, I swung on to the rope and cautiously, with infinite difficulty landed in the canoe Indra then unloosed the rope and climbed down I do not know to this day by what means he supported himself as he descended My heart began to beat so violently that I could not even look at him For two or three minutes I heard nothing but the wild roar of the tempestuous waters A little laugh suddenly made me turn, and I saw Indra holding the canoe with both his hands and climbing The little dinghy swerved sharply round in a circle and then sped swiftly down like a shooting star

II

IN A FEW MOMENTS THE DARKNESS HAD CLOSED in upon us All that could be discerned was the vast swollen waters on either side, and buoyed up between, the little canoe with two boys in it I had not then reached the age at which I could realise the solemn immensity of this aspect of Nature, but I have not forgotten to this day what I saw that night The midnight gloom took shade before my eyes, tense, silent and immutable, lonely and companionless like a vast incarnation of *Kali* herself Dark masses of her hair covered the earth and the heavens, and the dim phosphorescence, glimmering over the countless eddies that seemed to run in rows over the enormous outreaching flow, suggested a half suppressed mocking smile, sinister, malevolent and pitiless Here a rushing current would suddenly strike against the bed of the river and, rising, burst into foam , there, cross-currents would meet, and dashing together create a whirlpool , and all about us was the mad, unimpeded surge of water sweeping furiously by

I could just sense that our canoe was crossing the river diagonally But it was beyond my power to discern what landmark or spot on the opposite bank Indra was steering to through the inky darkness I did not know then what an expert steersman he was Suddenly he spoke, "Well, Srikanta, are you afraid ?"

"Well, no," I answered

"Good," said Indra, much pleased "There's nothing to fear if you know how to swim "

A suppressed gasp was my only reply I could see no difference between swimming on such a night in the midst of those mad currents and swift-flowing tides, and not swimming at all But Indra did not utter another word

After a long while I heard a new sound, muffled and faint presently it grew clearer and louder It was like a distant echo of an angry threatening call uttered from many throats Though heavy with weariness, the sound was incessant, without break or pause , the anger of those unseen presences did not appear to abate or to increase, and showed no sign of ever coming to an end At irregular intervals came cracking sounds followed by a thud or splash "What is that sound, Indra ?" I asked

"It is the sound of the sandy bank opposite being cut away by the currents," he replied as he again set the prow of the canoe in the required direction

"How high is the bank ?" I asked, "and how strong is the current ?"

"Oh, it's terrific The water is black we can't pass under the bank to-night If it should crack above us we'd be smashed to atoms Can you row, Srikanta ?"

"Sure I can "

"Then row "

I began to row, and heard Indra say, "Look this way There ! Do you see something black on the left ? That's a reef There's canal through it , that's our way But be careful, not a sound ! If the fishermen catch us there they won't let us out alive They'll knock our heads to bits with their poles and bury us deep in the mud "

"Don't let's go that way then," said I, terror-stricken

Perhaps Indra laughed a little as he said, "But there is no other way We must pass through that canal Even steamers could not force a way through the strong current that flows beside the big reef yonder We could come back that way, but not now " "Then," said I, as I pulled in the oar, "let's have no more of this business "

In an instant the canoe spun round and shot down with the current "Why did you come then ?" asked Indra, in obvious disgust, and in an angry whisper added, "All right ! I'll take you back, you coward !"

I was in my fifteenth year I could not swallow the insult In a flash I put out my oar and began to row for all I was worth

"Right !" said Indra "But easy, my boy ! The fishermen are terrible ruffians. I will steer beside the willow trees through that field of maize so that the rascals will know nothing of it" And then he said laughing, "And what if they do ? It won't be so easy to catch us Look here, Srikanta, never you fear The idiots have got as many as four canoes, it's true , but if you do find that they are drawing all round us and there is no way of escape, just you slip into the water, dive and come out as far way as you can D'you see ? It will beat them all to find us in this darkness Won't it be fun to swim to Satua's reef and to come across in the morning to our bank and then walk back home along the river ? What can the beggars do ?"

I had heard the name of the reef before "But Satua's reef is such a long way off," I protested

"You call that a long way ?" said Indra indifferently "It is hardly twelve or fifteen miles If your arms get tired, all you have got to do is to keep afloat on your back , besides, you will get plenty of half-charred logs of wood floating by you, logs from the burning ghats

There was nothing left to say about this encouraging prospect I had to look forward to a dawn after keeping afloat for fifteen miles across those swift and deep eddying currents through the inky darkness of the night, without trace of a horizon anywhere Till then there was no question of going ashore for to attemp that was to risk being submerged by the steep sandy bank, fifteen to twenty feet high, crashing down on your head The tempestuous waters of the river were rushing on in a wide arc, eating rapidly into the bank and causing gigantic landslides

As the prospect so breezily outlined by Indra sank into my consciousness, the stout heart within me contracted to a very small point After rowing for a while longer I asked, "But what will become of your dinghy ?"

"The other day," said Indra, "I made my escape just this way Next day I came back and took my dinghy from them I told someone else must have stolen out in my dinghy at night, and that it wasn't I "

Then the escape he had been picturing was no idle dream or fancy, but based on his actual experience !

The canoe went up to an opening between two reefs, through which water flowed as in a canal at its mouth were tied a number of fishermen's boats in a row, their lamps burning dimly We went round one of the reefs to the other side, where the force of the water had created several channels for its flow, these, however, were hidden from view by clumps of casuarina trees Passing through one of these openings we came into the central canal and saw fishermen's boats looking like dark bushes in the distance A little further, and we had arrived at our destination

The fishermen who guarded the main gateway of the canal had not thought it necessary to set any guard over this spot They had set up here an ingenious fish-trap When the canal is dry, fishermen plant wooden posts in a row from one end of the canal to the other and fix a net on the outer side of these posts Then in the rainy season when big fish like *rohi* and *katla* come down the canal they leap over the posts to avoid them and get caught in the net

In the twinkling of an eye Indra landed five or six *rohis* and *katlas* weighing ten, fifteen, or twenty *seers* each The huge fishes seemed to be trying to break the frail canoe to pieces, lashing their tails against its sides and flapping noisily about

"What will you do with so many fish, Indra ?"

"I want them But that is enough now Let's get away," and he let the net go from his hand There was now no further need for rowing, and I sat still We were making for the opening through which we had come, going as secretly as before After being carried down the canal by the swift current for two or three minutes, our little canoe, with a sudden jerk, entered the adjoining field of maize Taken unawares by this sudden change of direction, I asked, "What's the matter ? What has happened ?" Indra sent the canoe further inland with another push, and whispered, "Silence ! The rascals have got the scent—they are coming this way in all the four boats—look !" He was right making much noise with their sturdy oars, the boats were advancing like nocturnal demons eager to swallow us Behind was the net spread across the canal and in front were our enemies—

which way could we turn for escape ? I did not think it possible for us to conceal ourselves in the field of maize

"Do tell me what we are to do !" I said in a tear-choked voice Who was there to prevent these men from killing us in this horrible trap and doing away with all trace of our dead bodies by burying them in this very field ?

Indra had played the role of a triumphant thief successfully before and had reached home safely, but this time—? He merely said, "There's nothing to fear," but I thought I could detect a tremor in his voice However, not for a moment did he stop Discarding the oar for one of the dinghy's long poles, he pushed with all his force, trying to get as far inland as possible and thus conceal our canoe The whole reef had been inundated with water, above which, to a height of ten or twelve feet, rose crops of maize or *jowari* Through the jungle of stalks we two worked our stealthy way The water was at some places chest-deep, and at others not deeper than the waist or knee Above us there was pitch darkness, and on all sides of us the jungle of maize Presently the pushing poles began to stick in the mud, and the canoe could hardly move From behind came indistinct sounds of the fishermen's talk There could be no doubt that something had raised their suspicions and that they were still reconnoitring the whole area

Suddenly the canoe lurched to one side and righted I realised that I was alone Stricken with fear, I called, "Indra !"

From some way within the jungle came the response, "I am overboard"

"Why ?"

"I shall have to drag the boat out of this I've got the rope tied round my waist"

"Where will you drag her out to ?"

"To the main stream A short tow will take us there"

I said not a word more We began to advance slowly All of a sudden the sound of kerosene tins being beaten and the rasping of split bamboos nearby startled me "What is that ?" I asked, overcome

with fear "It is the peasants watching their fields," Indra replied, "they are scaring away the wild boars"

"Wild boars ! Where ?"

"How can I tell ? I can't see them But of course they must be somewhere about here," he said, in his nonchalant manner

I had not the heart to utter another word "Surely," I thought, "the person I saw first this morning must have had a most inauspicious face !" Only that evening in our own house I had almost fallen into the jaws of a tiger ! What wonder, then, that in this jungle I should fall an easy prey to wild boars ! But at any rate I was in the canoe my companion, wading through the jungle in mud and water as high as his chest, unable, should the occasion arise, to turn aside a step—who knew what fate awaited him ? Fifteen minutes passed in silence As we advanced haltingly I noticed every now and then a curious sound—a sharp rustle as if the head of a *jowari* or maize stall were being violently shaken, and then a splash This happened once quite near my hand Timidly I drew Indra's attention to it "If it were not a big boar, might it be a young one ?"

"That's nothing," he said in the smoothest of tones "those are snakes that have coiled themselves on the stalks, when they get frightened they jump down into the water"

Nothing—*only* snakes ! Trembling in every limb I sat huddled up in the middle of the canoe With a sinking heart I asked, almost in a whisper, "What sort of snakes ?"

"There are all kinds," said Indra, "*dhora, bora,* cobra, *krait*—they come floating down the water and coil themselves round trees and stalks Don't you see there's no land here ?"

Of course I saw that But while a paroxysm of fright made my hair stand on end, that strange young man, without a sign of alarm, went on, saying as he plodded onward, "But they don't bite—too frightened to bite—two or three of them just brushed my body as they fled Some of them are very big too—they must be *boras* or *dhoras*, I think And what if they do bite ! One must die some day, my boy"
I sat speechless, beside myself with fear, still as a block of wood, afraid

even to breathe, for what could prevent one of them taking a plunge down on to the canoe itself?

But what kind of creature was this I had been wandering with—man, god or demon? If he was a man, was he altogether unaware of the thing we called fear? Was his heart made of stone? Did it never contract or expand like ours? But then, only the other day he had faced a crowd of assailants in order to bring me, an unknown boy, out to safety, was the kindness that I had seen in him, too, an element of his stony heart? And to-day, though he knew intimately every aspect of the danger that faced him, he stood in front of a most terrifying death silently and with an unflinching soul, not once had he told me, "Srikanta, you get off the canoe" He could have forced me to get down and been safe in the canoe all by himself How casually had he said, "One must die some day", It was true that it was he who had led me into danger, but how could I ignore the great self-effacement that followed? How could I forget his natural, unforced gift to me or cease to ask who had fashioned his large heart and with what elements? Since then I have passed through many vicissitudes, acquired much experience and arrived at old age, I have wandered much over hill and plain and forest and known many men, but never have I set my eyes on anyone with so large a heart or such a selfless nature! But to-day he is no more like a bubble he has mingled in the great Void That is why remembrance of him brings tears today to my eyes a stormy bitterness surges up in my heart in angry frustration Why, why should this wonderful thing have been created, and being created, why should it have passed out so ineffectual and futile? My mind, impatient and in pain, asks this question to-day again and again "Oh God! I see you give people wealth, success, learning in profusion from your store-house, but how many great souls have you given us like Indra?"

Long minutes passed, and at last I could perceive that we were gradually approaching some roaring concourse of waters I understood, without further questioning, that at the end of this jungle flowed the furious and awe-inspiring river which even steamers could not cross at that time of the year I could plainly feel the

currents becoming swifter and swifter, and the grey masses of foam produced the illusion of large stretches of sand Indra clambered into the canoe and, taking the paddle in his hand, sat expectant, ready for the impetuous river ahead "There is nothing more to fear," he said "Here we come upon the main stream"

"Well and good, if there really is nothing to fear," was my inward comment, "though I haven't yet been able to find out what there is that would excite *your* fear" The next instant a slight tremor passed over the whole canoe, and in the twinkling of an eye she was rushing along at lightning speed, caught by the main current

The moon was then rising behind the scattered clouds, the darkness in which we had begun our expedition had lessened We could now see, though dimly, a good distance on every side We left the wild casuarina trees and the reef of *jowari* and maize to our right and went straight ahead

III

"I'M AWFULLY SLEEPY, INDRA DO LET US GO back home"

Indra laughed softly, and there was a woman's tenderness in his voice as he answered, "Of course you feel sleepy, my boy but I can't help it, Srikanta We shall be a little late—I have got a lot to do yet But why don't you lie down here and have some sleep ?"

I did not need to be told a second time I lay down huddled together on the narrow board on which I had been sitting But it was impossible to sleep In silence and with half-closed eyes I watched the moon playing hide-and-seek with the clouds The dull monotonous swish of the water went on incessantly, lulling me into reverie Such reveries were not usual with me, but perhaps the weariness of my mood after my weird experiences needed just that monotone to pass into a listless harmony with the calm of the night

About two hours must have passed thus though indeed I lay unconscious of the passage of time Suddenly I felt as if the moon had dived under the clouds on my right and, after a long swim, emerged on my left Raising my head I saw that our dinghy had veered to cross the river I had little energy left for asking questions and lay down again as before Once more I watched the play of the moon and the clouds and listened to the rustle of the water Thus another hour must have passed away

Swish !—our canoe had run aground on sandbank Sitting up, I saw we had crossed over to our own side of the river But what place was this ? How far away was our home ? Nothing but an immense waste of sand lay before us Suddenly I heard the barking of dogs Surely, I thought, there must be human habitation close by

"Just wait for me awhile, will you ?" said Indra "I'll be back presently there is nothing to be afraid of Just over there are fishermen's huts "

I did not wish to fall short of the occasion, having passed so many difficult tests Perhaps no age of man is so mysterious as his adolescence The inner workings of a person's mind are difficult enough at any age to unravel or follow, but those of an adolescent mind are perhaps almost incomprehensible That is why, it seems to me, the love and play of the two adolescents of Brindavan have ever remained wrapt in impenetrable mystery Some, unable to assess the matter by means of the intellect have called it good, and some have called it evil, some have measured it by ethical, and some by aesthetic yardsticks, others again have thrown all standards and arguments to the winds and in the fervour of their chanting and dancing appeared drunken or even insane Even the moralists have been forced to acknowledge that nowhere else have they seen such an upsurge of emotional felicity and spontaneity, and those whose temperaments or aesthetic standards have clashed with such ardent expression have had to admit that nowhere else have they heard such entrancing singing

But the cause of these mystic raptures—the ancient yet ever-new *lilas*[*] of the two divine adolescents in the woods of Brindavan, before which even our Vedanta[†] is as nothing, and *salvation* is like a tiny water-drop before the ocean,—who has ever been able to solve its mystery ? But I was saying, I was at an age when, though the spirit and the strength of youth were yet to arrive, pride and the desire for emulation had already awakened in me, and the last thing I would want was to be counted a coward So without the least hesitation I said, "Why should I be afraid ? I will wait for you here " Indra said nothing more and in an instant disappeared out of sight

* Divine play or sport

† Hindu philosophy which propounds the identity of the individual Soul with divinity or the Universal Soul

Above me, the same hide-and-seek of light and darkness behind, the long, unceasing moan of the great river, and before me, dim stretches of a sandy bank As I sat trying to conjecture what place this might be, Indra came running back to me "Srikanta," he said, "I have come back to say something particular If anybody comes and asks you for fish, don't give him any Be very careful you don't give any fish to anybody, even if you see somebody exactly like me Mind this If anyone asks for fish, say to him, 'I'll put ashes into your mouth You can take them yourself if you want them ' But don't, on any account, give away fish with your own hand—even if he were exactly like me Do you understand ?"

"But I don't understand "

"I'll tell you when I come back But be careful !" He disappeared as quickly as he had come

This time every hair on my body stood on end, and the blood seemed to freeze in my veins I was no child that I could not guess at what awful thing Indra was hinting Many events have occurred in my life compared to which our little adventure was an insignificant affair But I can truly say that language is powerless to describe the terror which surged through my soul when Indra left me I all but lost consciousness through sheer fright Every minute it seemed to me as if somebody was peering at me from beyond the high, sandy bank in front of me, and drew back every time I glanced sideways at him

What an endless time Indra was taking to return !

At last I thought I heard human voices I twisted my sacred thread a hundredfold round my thumb and sat with my head bent low, straining to catch the slightest sound As the voices became clearer I realized that two or three men were coming towards me talking One of them was Indra and the other two were up-country men But before I saw their faces, I had a good look to see if they cast shadows in the moonlight, for I had known the indisputable truth from my childhood that those *others* cast no shadows

What relief !—for they had shadows, though very faint ones I wonder if any sight has brought more joy and satisfaction to anyone The up-country men removed the fish from our canoe with extra-

ordinary despatch and tied them up in a piece of gauze-like cloth A jingling sound revealed to me what it was they pressed into Indra's hands

Indra unloosed the canoe, but did not let it move down the stream He began to punt it slowly along the bank of the river

I said nothing, for my mind had risen against him in inexpressible bitterness and disgust So this was the hero whom a moment ago I had wanted to embrace in sheer delight at the sight of his pale shadow in the moonlight ! Yes, that is how man is constituted—at the slightest discovery of another's fault we forget in an instant everything we have known to his credit But what had I seen ? Only this—he had not shown the least sign of hesitation in taking money from disreputable men Until then it had never entered my mind that our nocturnal adventure might be regarded as a thieving expedition In boyhood it is only the stealing of money that is synonymous with theft, not the stealing of other things That was why all the glory of our adventure vanished with the jingling of coin If Indra had thrown away all the fish into the Ganges, if he had done any conceivable thing with them except this one thing of bartering them for money, I should have resented the suggestion that we were out on a thieving expedition I have no doubt that in my boyish enthusiasm I should have wanted to knock down anyone who expressed so outrageous an opinion and should have felt completely justified in doing so But this -this was vile—the sort of thing that jail birds did

"You didn't get scared, did you, Srikanta ?" asked Indra

"No," I answered curtly

"Do you know what you have done ?" asked Indra "Nobody else could have sat here alone as you have done, you know You are the best friend I've got and I'll never forget it How would you like me to bring you with me every time I come out in future ?"

I made no reply, but just then the light of the moon, released from the clouds, fell on his face and something that I saw in his features made me forget all my irritation and indignation in one sweep of reconciliatory emotion I asked, "Indra, have you seen anything of *them* yourself ?"

"Who ?"

"Well, those who come and ask for fish ?"

"Why, no, I haven't I only told you what I've heard from others "

"But can you come here alone ?"

Indra laughed "Why, I often do "

"Aren't you afraid ?"

"No, I'm not I take the name of Rama, and then those people can never come near me " He paused for an instant and then continued, "Do you think taking the name of Rama is a little thing ? If you pass near a snake with that name on your lips, you will be absolutely safe All creatures, you will see, will make way for you and flee from you in terror But you mustn't be afraid They will know if you are really afraid and if your courage is only make-believe, because they can read your thoughts, you know "

The sandy bank now began to get more gravelly The current on this bank was very slow, indeed our course upstream seemed to be a drift Indra changed his pole for the paddle and said, "We shall have to go through that thickly overgrown bit—I shall have to get down there I sha'n't be long, I shall be back in a minute "

"All right," I said reluctantly, for I had no excuse left for detaining him Besides, Indra seemed quite assured regarding my courage As for myself, I was far from feeling easy about the matter The place looked dark like a real forest, and, in spite of Indra's reassuring touching faith in the potency of Rama's name, I was not eager to put it to the test alone in the canoe, in that eerie solitude under the dark, gaunt branches of an old banyan tree An uncontrollable inward tremor took possession of me It was true there was no more fish in the canoe, but who could say that *they* would confine their importunities to begging for fish ? And memories of stories of people's necks being twisted, of their warm blood being sucked, and their flesh being chewed flitted across my brain

Indra began to paddle hard, and our canoe spun forward Before long we were confronted by a clump of *kasar* and wild casuarina trees To our right, submerged except for their tops, they appeared to be

looking in silent wonder at the two adventurous human boys, and gravely shaking their heads at us as if in reprobation or warning , while on the high gravelly bank to our left stood more of their blood-relations in massed crowds, looking equally stupefied with amazement, equally deprecating and solemn If I had been alone I would no doubt not have flouted their warning But our indomitable helmsman was so well fortified with the name of Rama that he looked neither right nor left Owing to the lowness of the right bank, this part of the river had become like a lake, with openings on either side I asked Indra how he would get up the bank as I could discover no path leading down to the water

"There is a narrow path," he said, "besides that banyan tree over there "

For some time a peculiar putrid odour had been noticeable , it became more intense as we advanced A sudden gust of wind brought so overpowering a stench that I had to hold my *dhoti* to my nose "Something is rotting here, Indra " I said

"It's a cropse," he replied coolly "People are dying of cholera in hundreds Not every one can afford a proper pyre , many just put a fire to the mouth of the corpse and leave it to the dogs and the jackals, or just to rot That's where the stench is from "

"Where do they leave their dead ?"

"All over here—this is the cremation-ground, you know They just put the body anywhere, take a bath over there under the banyan tree, and go home Don't start so—that's only jackals fighting Well then, come and sit near me here "

I was too frightened to speak , I crawled on all fours and sank down heavily near him "What are you afraid of, Srikanta ?" he asked, holding out a hand to me "I have often passed this way Do you think anybody would dare come near you if you take the name of Rama three times ?"

His touch seemed to infuse some life into my body "For God's sake," I said faintly, "don't get down here—let us pass straight on "

He touched me again on the shoulder as he said, "No, Srikanta,

I must go there now I must give them this money, they have been waiting for it, and I haven't been able to come to them for the last three days"

"But couldn't you do it to-morrow ?"

"No, I mustn't put if off You come with me, but mind you don't speak of it to anyone"

I assented vaguely and sat still as a statue, never once releasing my hold of him My throat felt parched but I had not the energy left to reach forward to the water

We were now in the shadow of the trees, and the landing could now be seen clearly beyond, being lit with the wan moonlight In the state of mind I was in this was great consolation As the canoe hove to, Indra jumped off the prow, avoiding a crash into the gravelly bank A cry of horror from him startled me a pitiful sight met our gaze

Perhaps the pathos of what we saw that night is impossible to convey to one who was not present himself There in the desolate midnight silence, broken only by the howls of hungry jackals and the flappings of the wings of vultures and other obscene birds, and by the moan of the ceaseless waters eddying past us, we stood without a word, looking on the most pitiful of objects A fair healthy-looking boy of six or seven lay on the bank, his head on the ground and the rest of his body half floating on the water The jackals had perhaps been at him when we approached The boy could not have been dead more than three or four hours The poor thing looked as if, worn out by the agony of cholera, he had at last found solace in the lap of the mother Ganges who was laying him gently, very gently, to sleep

When I looked at Indra he was sobbing soundlessly "Stand by, Srikanta !" he said, "I'm going to take the poor devil to those casuarinas on the reef and put him into the water there"

Now, though the sight of his tears had brought tears into my eyes too, this business of carrying a corpse was too much for me. This was going too far, surely ! For one thing, being descended from the venerable *rishis* and nurtured in the Hindu community, which, in

point of purity and sanctity, easily takes the lead of all the communities on the face of the earth, I had been taught to regard the touch of the dead as a terrible defilement and abomination, forbidden by a hundred rules and injunctions of the *shastras* reinforced by as many scriptural penalties and expiations Add to that the fact that we did not know what the boy had died of, what his caste was, and who his parents were How could we touch the corpse, not knowing these things, and totally ignorant as to whether the proper rites had been performed before the dead body was taken out of the house ? But while I was saying in a horrified voice, "You don't know what his caste is—will you touch the corpse ?" he had already passed one arm under the shoulders and the other below the knees of the body As he lifted it up lightly he said, "If I don't, the jackals will tear him to shreds and devour him Poor thing ! the smell of medicine is yet on his lips " And he put the corpse down on the plank on which I had just been lying Giving the canoe a push, he jumped into it "Do you really think a dead body has any caste ?" he asked

"Why shouldn't it have ?" I asked in return

"Why, it's just a dead body How can anything dead have caste ? This dinghy of ours—has it got any caste ? Whatever may have been the tree out of which it was made, mango, jack, or any other, nobody would now call it mango or jack tree Don't you see ?"

I know today that the analogy was very crude But I also know that his words contained a kernel of truth He could say such things To this day I wonder how this unlettered and wayward boy could blunder to such profound truths But perhaps I know the answer too There was not a speck of insincerity in Indra, his motives were always clear Was it not possible that this innate veracity of nature, by virtue of some hidden law, could spontaneously draw the universal truths into his individual soul ? Is not such unconventionalized intelligence indeed the highest and clearest intelligence ? For nothing in the universe is untrue or base in itself, what we call untruth is but the result of our faulty perception or appreciation Falsehood exists only in the mind of man So perhaps it is not strange that Indra, who had never harboured an untruth in his heart in all his life, could, with his

untainted intelligence, spontaneously reach out for and attain the true and the good in everything For the majority of us are very differently conditioned I recall in this connection an incident in my own life about twelve years later We heard one afternoon that an old Brahmin lady had died that morning in another quarter of the town, but that dead body was still lying there for lack of pall-bearers The reason for this was that on her way back from a pilgrimage to Benares she had taken ill suddenly and broken journey at our town to rest at the house of a distant relative, where, however, she had expired two days later Now the said relative being an "England-returned" gentleman was an outcast, to have chosen to die helplessly in his house was a sacrilege The obsequies were, however, over by next morning through the efforts of some of us but when we returned we found all doors barred against us The leaders of our social order had gone round from door to door the night before, hurricane lantern in hand, expiation had been prescribed for the heinous and sacrilegous act of cremating the unclean body The miscreants must shave their heads and humbly acknowledge their guilt by publicly partaking of a particular substance which, though very holy, was not exactly an article of food* It had been carefully explained at every house visited that there was no discretion in the matter, the purity of the social fabric had to be maintained against all un-Shastric acts In our predicament we sought the advice and protection of "Doctor Babu," who was the foremost physician in the town and who used to treat all Bengalis without charging a fee When he heard our story he was livid with wrath and swore that he would never again even treat our persecutors even though they died for want of medical treatment before his very eyes I do not know how the doctor's decision got about, but before the day was out we learnt that there was no need for us to shave our heads, it being quite sufficient to make a confession of our sin and to ingest the holy substance As we did neither, we were informed the next morning that we might simply make a formal admission—the other thing might

* The allusion is to cowdung —*Translator*

be left alone. As we were still recalcitrant, we were told that as first offenders we would be forgiven without any expiation. But Doctor Babu insisted that those who had hounded us for two days should ask forgiveness individually, otherwise he would adhere to his resolution, that is to say, he would not visit them at their houses again. Thereafter on that very evening the elderly leaders of our society condescended to drop in, one by one at the doctor's house for 'a friendly chat.' What they said to him besides showering their blessings on him I do not know, but thereafter the whole episode was forgotten by general consent. However, I had digressed. The point of my story is that the elders of our society, inspite of their age, had remained blind to the essential truth that the youthful heart of Indra had grasped. And only God knows whether their shastra-fogged vision would ever have been restored but for the surgical opreation of Doctor Babu's solemn pledge.

On coming to the reef Indra placed the dead body of the unknown boy with infinite tenderness on the water in the deep shadow of the half submerged casuarinas. The night was then almost spent. Indra remained for a time bending low over the body as if straining to catch some sound, some voice. When at length he raised his face in the wan moonlight, it looked very pale.

"Let us go now," I said.

"Where shall we go?" Indra asked absent-mindedly.

"I thought you just said we had to go somewhere."

"No, not to-day."

"All right, then," I said in an access of relief, "let us go home."

Indra fixed his eyes on my face and asked, "Do you know, Srikanta, what happens to men when they die?"

"Why, no, I don't," I said hastily. "Let's get back home. They all go to heaven. Take me back to our house, Indra, in God's name."

Indra seemed hardly to hear. "It isn't everyone," he said, "that can go to heaven. Besides, they have all to stay here for some time. I tell you, Srikanta, when I was laying him on the water that little boy whispered clearly in Hindi, 'Brother.'"

I was on the point of bursting into tears out of fright and I said in a trembling voice, "Don't, please don't frighten me I shall faint" Indra said nothing, and did not even attempt to reassure me, he took the paddle and, bringing the canoe slowly out of the grove, pulled straight ahead "Srikanta," he said presently in a low, grave voice, "repeat the name of Rama to yourself *he* has not left our boat, *he* is sitting behind me"

I recollect that immediately after that I fell forwards on my face I remember nothing else, except that when I opened my eyes it was already light and that the boat was anchored Indra sat near my feet and spoke, "You will have to walk this little bit, Srikanta can you sit up ?"

IV

ANNADA DIDI

AFTER WALKING ALONG THE BANKS OF THE Ganges with steps weighed down by overpowering fatigue, I arrived home haggard and red-eyed My arrival caused a sensation and was greeted with wild cries of "Here he is," "here he is," that nearly overwhelmed me

Jatin-da was about my age , so it was he, naturally, who was most excited at my return He came bounding towards me at a frantic speed, announcing my arrival with a deafening yell, "Srikanta has come, Mej-da He has just come in," and, eagerly dragging me along, he made me stand on the door-mat of the sitting-room

Mej-da was deep in his studies, just as he had been on the previous evening when the alarm of "Tiger" was raised He lifted his head, eyed me for an instant, and resumed his reading He must have felt like a tiger that has secured its prey and decides to devour it at ease It may well be doubted whether he had ever had so promising an opportunity of punishing a culprit

Perfect silence reigned for a minute while I wondered miserably what form my inevitable punishment would take I was feeling too exhausted to stand Mej-da, however, appeared to have no leisure , he was preparing for his examination

(I hope you have not forgotten our Mej-da whose vigilant eye kept us at our books and who had the previous evening confounded the "royal Bengal tiger" by his unearthly yells) Suddenly a voice came through the side-door, "Will you look up the almanac, Satish, and see

whether brinjals are prohibited or not ?"* The voice was followed by my aunt who stopped abruptly on seeing me "So you have come at last, you vagabond ? And when were you pleased to arrive ? Where under the sun have you been ? Good gracious, what a jewel of a boy you are, to be sure ! I couldn't sleep a wink all night worrying myself to death about you Fancy slinking away with that rascal Indra ! Heaven knows what kind of food he has had and where Where have you been, you scamp ? Dear me, what a black face he has got, and red eyes too ! I shouldn't be surprised if he has got fever Come here let me see—" rattling off one question after another, she came forward and felt my forehead with her hand "Just what I thought it is quite hot One ought to tie up such boys hand and foot and whip them with stinging nettles I sha'n't have any peace of mind until I have turned you out of the house, vagabond that you are Come,—come and have your sleep out, you wretched monkey" She dragged me along, forgetting all about the brinjals

"He cannot go now," said Mej-da with a rumble of thunder in his voice

"And what will he do here ? No, he cannot study He will first have a bite of breakfast, and then go to bed at once Come along with me," and my aunt started again

The prey was about to escape from Mej-da's clutches Forgetting himself, he roared at me, "Take care I tell you, you sha'n't go, Srikanta" Even my aunt was taken aback at this outburst Then she turned and said just one word, "Sate-e-e"† She was a woman of masterful personality, and everybody in the house was afraid of her Mej-da quailed and withered before her glance In the next room sat

* The Bengali almanac gives information and advice for each day of the year, including what articles of food are prohibited for particular days and seasons

† Short for Satish, Mej-da's name

our Bar-da * If the matter reached his ears the consequences would be dreadful

My aunt had no liking for scenes, even when very angry she would never speak with unnecessary vehemence or loudness "Is that so ?" she asked quietly "Well, I have heard, Satish, that you have a habit of beating the boys in season and out of season If I ever hear of your doing it again, I will have you tied to this post and beaten by my servants, do you hear ? Impudent donkey that you are, you have been failing at every examination year after year and you must needs bully these little boys to death Whether they do their lessons or not, don't you dare ask them a single question again, do you hear ?" Taking me with her she went out through the door by which she had come Mej-da sat looking very black, for none dared defy his mother's orders

She took me to her own room and, giving me a change of clothes, made me eat a hearty breakfast of hot *jalebis* She then bade me lie down and, with the remark that nothing short of my death would bring comfort to her old bones, she went out and chained the door from the outside

About five minutes later the chain was noiselessly unloosed and Chhot-da came in panting and flung himself on my bed Struggling with the excess of joy that had evidently sent him to me, he gasped "Do you know what order Mother has given Mej-da ? He is not to interfere with us in any way You and I and Jatin will have a room Bar-da will look after our studies We won't care a rap for him now," and he snapped his fingers in tune with his violent excitement

Nor was Jatin-da slow in making his appearance He was evidently overcome with joy at his own cleverness It was he who had given the glad tidings to Chhot-da and sent him to me At first he let himself have his pent-up laugh out Then, smiting his chest with his hand repeately, "I, I," he declared, "it's I who am responsible

* Eldest brother

for this, do you realise ? Would mother have given the order if I had not taken Srikanta to Mej-da ? I say, Chhot-da, I must have that clockwork top of yours "

"All right," said Chhot-da in an access of impulsive generosity · "you will find it in my desk " An hour ago Chhot-da would have died rather than part with this top, but joy of recovering the rights wantonly encroached upon by Mej-da was well worth paying for

Indeed the tyranny of Mej-da had known no bounds On Sundays we had to walk a mile in the blazing heat of noon to summon his friends to a game of cards During the summer vacation one of us had to fan him while he took his daily siesta On winter nights, while he sat reading cuddled up tortoise-fashion inside the quilt, we had to turn over the leaves of his book for him And yet we could not rebel or complain, for such a gesture would forthwith bring fresh persecution, "Keshab, bring your geography I will examine you in your old lessons Jatin, go and fetch me a good casuarina branch " The inevitable birching would follow Little wonder, therefore, that our jubilation on this occasion exceeded reasonable limits

But great as was our joy, we had to curb these manifestations of our feelings, for it was near school-time As I had fever I was exempt from the necessity of going to school, and, as a matter of fact, my fever kept me in bed for seven or eight days

I can not recall how many days it was after this that I went again to school, or when I met Indra again It must have been weeks later It was a Saturday and we had returned from school early The Ganges had fallen I sat by a ditch near the river angling for fish , several other anglers were there too Suddenly I caught a glimpse of one half hidden by a reed-bush who was evidently landing catch after catch Being dissatisfied with my position I decided to go and sit near him When I got there, tackle in hand, he said quietly without turning to look, "Sit down here beside me Are you all right, Srikanta ?" His voice sent a tingling spasm through my heart, for it was Indra My pulse quickened, though I could not speak He whose memory I had been carrying like a hidden treasure, whose companionship I longed for with a passionate yearning, whom nevertheless I

secretly dreaded to meet, *he* had flashed unexpectedly before my eyes and was asking me to sit near him !

"Did you get a terrible drubbing, Srikanta," asked Indra, "after you returned the other day ? I really shouldn't have taken you out I felt very sorry for it afterwards "

"No," I replied, shaking my head, "I didn't get a drubbing at all "

"You didn't ?" said Indra, evidently relieved "Look here, Srikanta, when you left me I prayed—I prayed to Mother Kali—that nobody should beat you Kali is a great goddess if you pray to her, nobody will ever be able to beat you The Mother confuses their mind so that they can't do anything to you " And he put down his rod and joining his palms together touched his forehead, as a grateful obeisance to the invisible goddess Then he baited the hook afresh, threw the line, and said, "I never thought you would get ill , if I had, I wouldn't have let the illness come "

"What would you have done ?" I asked solemnly

"Nothing," he said "I would just have plucked a *java*[*] flower and placed it on Kali's feet She loves the *java* so much that if you offer her a flower and make a prayer she will always grant it Everyone knows that Don't you ?"

"Aren't you ever taken ill ?"

"I ill ?" echoed Indra in surprise "No, I'm never ill—never " He seemed fired by a sudden enthusiasm and said, "Look here, Srikanta, I'll teach you something If you call to the *devatas* morning and evening, they will come and stand before you, and you will see them plainly , and then you will never get ill No one will be able to touch a hair of your head You will find that it is so You can go wherever you like, do what you like, just as I do ; and nothing will ever happen to you Do you understand ?"

[*] The shoe-flower

I nodded and said, "Yes" As I threw my baited hook into the water, I asked in a low voice, "Whom do you take there now ?"

"Where ?"

"Over there, to catch fish ?"

Indra pulled in his line and, putting his rod gently beside him, said, "I don't go there any more"

I was much surprised and asked, "Haven't you been there again a single day ?"

"No, not once She made me take an oath" He stopped awkwardly

I had not been able to forget his selling of fish, the thought had brought me pain ever since that night "Who made you take the oath ?" I asked "Your mother ?"

"No, not mother" Indra again lapsed into silence Then, while winding the line on the fishing-rod he asked, "Srikanta, have you told anybody at home about that night ?"

"No But everybody knows I had gone with you"

Indra asked no further questions I thought he was going to get up, but he sat there, preoccupied yet uncomfortable He had lost his usual cheerfulness, and seemed to be troubled by thoughts which he would rather express but could not Some might suspect me of imagining things because mine was not the age for subtle psychological analysis But it must be remembered that I loved Indra, it is love and sympathy that enable one to understand the inner working of another's mind, not intellect or age

Indra raised his head and tried to speak, but a sudden blush suffused his face and he lowered his head again He plucked a reed and drawing it to and fro over the water said, "Srikanta"

"Yes ?"

"Have you—have you got—any money ?"

"How much ?"

"How much ? Say, five rupees ?"

"Yes, I have Will you take it ?" I looked at his face in joyful expectation I had just the amount he wanted, and I could not imagine a better use for the money than its being a help to Indra But far from appearing pleased, Indra looked more embarrassed than ever After a moment's silence he said, "But I shall not be able to return it, Srikanta "

"I sha'n't want it back," I said with hurt pride

He relapsed into a short silence, his head bent low Presently he said slowly, "I don't want it for myself Somebody wants money, you see They are very poor, they don't get enough to eat Will you go there with me ?"

All at once the thought of that night of adventure came to my mind "You mean the folk you wanted to give money to that night ?"

"Yes," said Indra, nodding absent-mindedly "It isn't as if I can't get money for them, but Didi* won't accept anything from me You'll have to go, Srikanta, otherwise she won't take the money She will think I have stolen it from my mother's safe Will you go, Srikanta ?"

"Is she your real sister ?"

Indra smiled and said, "No, but I call her sister You will come ?" Seeing me silent he added, "There's nothing to be afraid of if we go by day, you know To-morrow is Sunday, meet me here after your dinner, and I will take you and bring you back in no time You'll come, won't you ?" And so wistfully did he look at me, holding me by the hand, that I did not have the heart to say "No " I agreed to go with him and then went home

But having given my word a feeling of uneasiness gripped me I dreaded the adventure to which I had committed myself I sulked all day and at night my dreams were troubled My first waking thought on Sunday was a presentiment of calamity, for if the matter

* Elder sister

became known, the punishment I should render myself liable to would probably be such as not even Chhot-da could devise for Mej-da

However, dinner was over at last, and, taking my five rupees with me, I quietly slipped out of the house Several times on my way the thought occurred to me, "Better not go What does the promise matter ?", but when I arrived at my destination and saw Indra sitting expectant in his little canoe in the thicket of reeds, he greeted me with such a smile that it was impossible for me to propose that our projected trip should be abandoned I climbed down into the canoe in silence Indra immediately unloosed it and we set out

I now think that it must be owing to my good deeds in former lives that I was not restrained by fear from going out with Indra Few people can have the experience that came to me on that day I would not have got such a companion on any other occasion , such moments come but rarely in one's life But when they do come they leave an indelible impression on one's mental fabric and as it were determine the pattern of one's subsequent life I owe it to that day's experience that I can never look down on any woman Reason tells me that there must be evil women as there are evil men, that they are not all like Indra's "Didi," and that much of the suffering in the world is caused by them Yet the impression somehow persists that all that is an appearance or a cloak which hides their real nature, their innate goodness My friends assure me thas this is sheer folly on my part I do not protest, for admittedly my faith is not based on reason but on intuition or on instinct The hand that created or moulded my intuitive faith may be no more it was her express desire that I should make no attempt to keep track of her But He who knows all knows how many obeisances I have made to her memory in my silent thoughts

The day was not far advanced when, after tying our canoe to the roots of the banyan beside the narrow landing-place, we made our way towards the cremation-ground A few steps led us to a vague footpath through the jungle on our right Indra struck out by this path, and after about ten minutes a hut came into view As we drew near, we saw that the entrance was barred by a gate Indra carefully opened

the corded noose that held the gate to , and, after going in and drawing me inside, closed the gate, tying the knot as before Never in my life had I seen such a human habitation The jungle was thick all around the hut and the spread of a huge tamarind and a *pakur* tree above darkened the yard still more Our entry was greeted by the screams of a brood of startled chickens from one corner of the yard and the bleating of a pair of goats from another And right in front of us sprawled an immense python with its fearful coils spread all over the place In a split second I was scrambling up the fence, startling the hens still more by my exclamations of alarm Indra burst out laughing, and cried, "Oh, that's a good fellow , he doesn't mind you in the least His name is Rahim " He went near the creature and, lifting him by the middle, moved him to one side of the yard When I got down from the fence, I saw, on the right of the verandah a tall, thin man sitting on a pile of tattered mats , he was panting after a violent fit of coughing His long, matted hair was coiled on his head, and round his neck were a number of necklaces of beads and dried nuts His jacket and *dhoti* were very dirty and dyed a dull yellow As his long beard was tied with a piece of cloth to his matted hair, I did not at first recognise him, but on coming near I found him to be a snake-charmer well known to me Five or six months before I used to run into him almost everywhere, and he had even given one or two exhibitions of snake-charming at our own house Indra addressed him as Shahji , he pointed to a seat for me and, raising his hand, indicated to Indra an earthen pipe and other materials for smoking *ganja* * Without a word Indra set about carrying out Shahji's silent directions When the pipe had been charged and lighted, Shahji, in spite of his coughing and gasping, began to pull at it for all he was worth, and when he had finished he closed his mouth and nostrils with his left hand as if to prevent even the tiniest speck of smoke from escaping Then with a vigorous nod of his head he said to Indra, handing him the pipe, "Smoke "

* Indian hemp, a strong intoxicant

Indra did not smoke He slowly put the pipe down on the floor and said, "No " Highly surprised at this, Shahji asked for the reason, but without waiting for a reply, took the pipe back When his fierce pulls had entirely burnt out its contents, he put it mouth down on the floor. A conversation ensued between Indra and Shahji, both talking in low voices, the latter speaking Hindi and Indra answering in Bengali throughout Much of the talk I could not hear, and much of what I heard I could not understand

Gradually passion began to animate Shahji's voice till it reached a maniacal pitch of vulgar abuse, the object of which I could not ascertain The outburst tired him, presently he leaned back against the wall and in a minute or two he was fast asleep, his head bent down on his chest After Indra and I had sat in silence for some time, I asked him with some impatience, "Hadn't we better go ? It is getting late "

"Go where, Srikanta ?"

"Won't you go to give the money to Didi ?"

"Why, I am waiting for her arrival This is her home "

"This ! Your Didi's home ! But these people are snake-charmer Musalmans "

Indra was about to say something, but suddenly stopped short his eyes, as he looked at me, seemed clouded with pain At length he said, "Some day I will tell you everything Would you like to see me charm a snake ?"

I said surprised, "You charm a snake ? Won't it bite you ?"

Indra went inside the hut and brought out a small cane basket and a gourdpipe He placed the cane basket before him on the verandah, unloosed the lid, and started playing the pipe Petrified with fear, I shouted, "Don't, please don't open the lid There may be a cobra inside " Indra made no reply, but, playing on the pipe and waving his head to and fro, he lifted the lid In the twinkling of an eye an enormous cobra raised itself Spreading its hood, it stood up a foot and a half high With a great sweep it struck savagely at the lid which was still in Indra's hand, and then slithered out of the basket

"Great God !" cried Indra in utter consternation as he leaped

down from the verandah into the yard I clambered up the fence again, while the enraged snake with another vicious snap at the pipe rushed into the hut Indra was livid with fright "This is a wild one," he said, "not the one I usually play to "

I was on the verge of tears, overcome by fear, disgust, and anger "What did you do it for ?" I asked "Supposing he comes out again and bites Shahji ?"

Indra looked crestfallen "I'd better close the door," he said "But then he may be hiding just behind it "

"If he is," I said, "he is sure to come out and bite Shahji "

Indra looked helplessly this way and that, then he burst out, "Serve him right if he does !—Keeps wild snakes in his house and hasn't got the sense to take any precautions, *ganja*-smoking idiot that he is ! Hullo, here is Didi ! Don't come nearer, Didi, please don't stay where you are "

Turning I saw Indra's Didi 'Smouldering embers' was the image that first came to me as I saw her She had the distant look of one just rising from an age-long penance Under her left arm was a bundle of dry twigs and in her right hand was a basket, shaped like a flower-basket, with some vegetable in it Her dress was that of an up-country Musalman, dyed orange-brown, but not dirty like Shahji's She wore a set of lac bangles, the parting of her dark hair was stained with vermilion mark, the sign of a married Hindu woman "Why, what is the matter ?" she asked, putting down her bundle of twigs to open the latch

"Dont't open it, I beg of you," said Indra greatly agitated "A big snake has got into the hut "

Didi looked at me, she seemed to be thinking something over Then, with a smile, she said, in clear Bengali, "Oh, is that it ? A snake entering a shanke-charmer's house—isn't that interesting, Srikanta ?"

I still gazed at her in silence, and wondered that she already knew my name Indranath, I supposed, had told her, "But how did it happen, Indranath ?" she asked

"He jumped out of the basket," Indra explained, "and went inside it is a wild one"

"Is he asleep?" asked Didi, pointing to Shahji

"Yes," said Indra angrily, "he has somked his fill of *ganja* and is now sleeping like a log You couldn't wake him if you shouted yourself hoarse at his ear"

Didi again smiled slightly, and said, "And you took the opportunity to show Srikanta a snake-dance, didn't you? Well, never mind, I'll go and catch him"

"No, please don't he will kill you Wake Shahji Please, I won't let you go" And Indra spread out his arms, trying to bar her way. She seemed to feel the depth of affection that rang in his anxious voice for a brief moment I saw a glistening softness in her eyes, but she laughed as she said, "Foolish mad boy, your Didi is not so fortunate, he won't hurt me Just watch me catch him" She reached out to the bamboo loft for a kerosene lamp and, having lit it, entered the room A minute later she emerged holding the snake in her hand, and, thrusting it into the box, closed the lid Indra touched the ground near her feet with his forehead, and, taking the dust from her feet, said, "Oh, Didi, how I wish you were really my own sister" She touched his chin with her hand, and, as she kissed the tips of her fingers,* she averted her face a little, perhaps to wipe her eyes unseen

*A form of affectionate benediction used by elders towards their juniors

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V

WHILE INDRA WAS RELATING HIS STORY I SAW Didi shudder two or three times She looked at him in silence for a while and then said, in a voice full of affectionate remonstrance, "Dear me, you mustn't do such things again You ought not to play with these dangerous creatures it was lucky that he only bit the lid in your hand , otherwise what a terrible thing might have happened "

"I'm not such a fool as all that, Didi," said Indra with a laugh, exhibiting a piece of dry root tied to a string round his waist. "Haven't I provided against danger? If I hadn't had this, do you think he would have spared me? But you don't know what trouble I had to get this from Shahji No snake dares to bite you, you know, when you've got this about you , and even if it had bitten me, what then? I would have wakened Shahji and put his poison-stone on the bite How long do you think would that stone take, Didi, to suck out all the poison? Half an hour, a whole hour, or less?"

Didi sat silent "You must give me one of those stones to-day, Didi," continued Indra, warming up "You've got two or three, and I have been asking you for one for ever so long" He did not wait for a reply, but immediately added in an aggrieved tone "I do everything you tell me to , but you always put me off to to-morrow or the day after to-morrow If you don't want to give it, why do you make promises? I won't come here again—and I don't want to have anything to do with you "

Though Indra did not notice it, I could distinctly see Didi's face darkening with pain and shame But the next instant she managed to bring the semblance of a smile to her thin, ascetic lips as she said, "So that's why you come to your Didi's house, Indra—to learn spells and incantations and to get the poison-stone is that it?"

"Yes, that's just it," said Indra without the least hesitation He sent a sidelong glance towards the sleeping Shahji, and added, "But he is always putting me off 'This is not an auspicious day,' he says, 'That is not an auspicious day,' and so on It's ages since he taught me the *mantra* for 'palm-divining',* ever since he has positively refused to teach me anything more But I have seen to-day, Didi, that you too know everything I want from you" He looked at me and, in a voice hushed with awe said, "Shahji may be a *ganja*-smoker, Srikanta, but he is such a magician he can bring a three days' corpse back to life Can you, too, restore a dead man to life, Didi ?"

Didi burst into a merry laugh, clear and infinitely sweet seldom have I heard anything so enchanting But, like the flash of lightning in a cloudy sky, it vanished as swiftly as it had appeared

Encouraged by Didi's laughter Indra said smilingly, "I know that you know everything Teach me every one of the things you have learnt, and I will remain your slave for the rest of my life How many dead bodies have you brought to life, Didi ?"

"But I tell you I don't know how to bring the dead back to life, Indranath"

"Hasn't Shahji taught you that *mantra*, Didi ?" As she shook her head to say "No," Indra looked at her face for a full minute in silence Then he said, "I know few people would want to teach this art to others But you must have learnt from him how to track by cowries ?"

"Oh, no," said Didi, "I don't even know what that is"

Indra evidently did not believe her "Indeed you don't," he said sarcastically "Why not tell me plainly that you won't teach me ?" Then, turning to me, he asked, "Have you ever seen cowrie-tracking, Srikanta ? Two shells, under the spell of *mantras*, will move to

* Snake-charmers claim that the power of the *mantra* turns the hand involuntarily in the direction where the snake hides, thus helping to track it down —*Trans*

wherever the snake is, then they will stick to his hood with the grip of a vice Even if the snake were a day's journey away, they would drag him all the way to your feet Such is the power of spells But, Didi, you must know the *mantras* for 'house-raising' and 'summoning a body' 'magnetizing dust' and so forth? If you don't, how could you catch that snake as you did?" and he turned a questioning face toward Didi

Didi sat in silence for some time, looking down, lost in thought When she raised her face she said slowly, "Indra, your Didi does not possess the least bit of all that knowledge If you can bring yourself to believe what I tell you, I will tell you everything to-day and get rid of the burden of my secret Will you believe me?" Her last words were heavy with pent-up emotion

I had scarcely spoken a word all this time, but now I cut in emphatically, "I will believe everything you say, Didi Yes, every word of it"

She looked at me with a smile and said, "Of course you will, my dear aren't you sons of good folk? Only low people are suspicious of what strangers say But believe me, I never tell a falsehood" She looked at me again and smiled rather sadly

The sombre gloom of evening had given place to a wan moonlight which filtered through the network of leaves and branches into the thick darkness below After a few moments' silence Didi suddenly said, "Indranath, I had thought of telling you my whole story to-day, but I realize that the time has not yet come Only believe me when I say that everything about us is a fraud Do not follow Shahji about, deluded by a vain hope We know nothing of *mantras*, nor can we revive the dead, nor track snakes by passing the cowrie-shell We do not know whether others can, but we ourselves certainly have no such power"

Though I could not exactly tell why, I believed every word she said, in spite of my short acquaintance with her But Indra remained incredulous "Well," he said angrily, "if you don't know any better than others, how could you catch the snake?"

"That was merely a deft trick of the hand, Indra," she said "there was no *mantra* in it I know nothing of snake-charming"

"If you don't," he asked bluntly, "why did you deceive me, you two, and cheat me of so much money ?"

Didi could not give any reply at once She seemed to me to be making an effort to collect herself "Cheats and humbugs !" cried Indra harshly "All right, I'll teach you a lesson, I will "

A kerosene lamp was burning quite near by its light I could see Didi's face blanch to a death-like pallor "We are only snake-charmers, Indra," she said, haltingly, "deceit is our daily trade—"

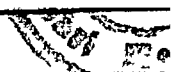
"I will teach you your daily trade Come, Srikanta, we shouldn't have touched the shadow of these rascally swindlers Knaves and humbugs !" Indra seized my hand with sudden force and started dragging me along with him I cannot blame Indra, for he had built up rosy hopes which were now suddenly dashed to the ground But something in Didi's face held my eyes Jerking myself free from Indra's grip, I went and placed my five rupees before her, saying, "I brought this for you won't you take it ?"

Indra pounced upon the rupees, saying, "Won't she ! You don't know, Srikanta, how much money these people have cheated me of by their mummery and their fibs ! If they die of want and starvation, that's just what I should like to see them do "

"No, Indra, give me the money," I said, pressing his hands "I brought it expressly for Didi—"

"Didi be damned," he cried, dragging me towards the fence

The row woke up Shahji from his stupor "What's that ? What's that ?" he asked, sitting up

"Rogue and rascal," cried Indra, leaving hold of me and stepping up to Shahji "I'll whip the hide off your back, you swine ! 'What's that ?' indeed ! As if you didn't know Going about saying he can revive corpses by *mantras* By Heaven, I'll resurrect you as you richly deserve, next time I see you," and he made such a savage gesture that even Shahji was visibly startled The latter's brain was evidently still befogged with *ganja* fumes, this strange and unexpected situation was too much for his grasp and he sat with a dazed, idiotic stare

When Indra had dragged me outside the enclosure we heard Shahji shouting behind us in clear Bengali, "Tell me, Indranath, what is all this?" It was the first time that I had heard him speak Bengali.

Indra turned back, and said, "As if you don't know. Will you tell why you have tricked me so long and taken so much money for nothing?"

"Who says for nothing?" he asked.

Indra pointed at Didi who was sitting silent, with bent head, and said, "She has told us that you know nothing of the black art. What you do know is to fool other people and cheat them of their money. That appears to be your trade, swindling liar!"

Shahji's eyes blazed with fury. I had not known till then what a terrible man he was, but the sight of those blazing eyes startled me. He stood up, tied his dishevelled hair, and moving towards Didi asked, "Have you really told them that?"

Didi sat silent, her head bowed as before. Indra nudged me, saying, "Let's go home. it's getting late." True, it was getting late, but I could not move a single step. Yet Indra went on, dragging me along. Behind us came the voice of Shahji again, "Why did you tell them?"

I did not hear Didi's reply, but we had hardly gone a few steps further when a sudden scream rent the darkness. In the twinkling of an eye Indra followed the sound and disappeared out of sight. I followed suit, but in turning stumbled on a big bush of *shiakul*. Its thorns gashed and tore my skin all over, extricating myself took quite some time, for by the time I released one part of my dress, another part would get entangled, and when that had been freed, a third part was caught up in the thorns. When at last I reached the front yard of the cottage I saw Didi lying unconscious at one end of it, and at the other end a grim tussle between master and disciple. Beside them was lying a pointed spear. Shahji had a tough body, but he could not have known that Indra was far tougher; if he had, perhaps he would not have wilfully run so grave a risk. In a few moments Indra had thrown him on his back and sat on his chest, gripping his

neck so hard that, had I not intervened, the life of Shahji the snake-charmer would soon have come to an end.

With a great effort I separated the two, and then the sight of Indra's condition made me burst into tears of dismay, for till then I had not noticed that all his clothes were terribly blood-stained "He hit me with the spear he kills snakes with," Indra gasped, "the confounded ruffian ! Look !" and pulling up his sleeves he showed me a deep gash in his arm

"Don't cry," he said to me "Tie this up as hard as you can " And then to Shahji, "Don't you dare move, you ! If you budge an inch I'll put my foot on your neck and tear out your tongue, you dastardly swine ! Now, Srikanta, tie this up, quick !" and he tore up a strip from the *dhoti* he was wearing I began dressing the wound with trembling hands, while Shahji watched with the glassy look of a dying viper

"No, I can't trust you," said Indra "You might commit murder I'll tie up your hands " And with Shahji's ochre-coloured turban he tied his hands together Shahji did not protest or resist

Indra put aside the stick with which Shahji had hit Didi and said, "What an ungrateful wretch this villain is ! How much of father's money have I not stolen for him and how much more would I not have stolen, had not Didi forbidden me Yet how readily he flung that spear at me to-day ! Srikanta, keep your eye on him see that he doesn't get up I'll dash some water on Didi's face "

After he had thrown some water on her face he said, as he fanned her, "From the day she told me, 'We would have taken it had it been your money, but it would be a great sin to take it from you,' no one knows how much torture she has suffered at his hands And yet she has fed him and given him money for his *ganja* by gleaning twigs, and making dung-cakes for sale Still he is never satisfied I shall not be happy until I make him over to the police If I don't he will kill her He might easily commit murder "

Shahji shivered at these words, raised his face for an instant, and then looked down again I can still remember the deep shadow of fear that I saw cross his face

I well know that people will not only hesitate to accept as true what I have set down above but even perhaps regard it as a laughable piece of imaginative writing Still I have written the above account as the price I pay for the truth of experience had my story not been grounded on truth I should have been afraid at every step that my readers would regard it as improbable and even ridiculous The fact that reality often outreaches imagination, instead of being a moral support to truthful chroniclers often acts as a restraining influence on the freedom of their pen

When Didi at last opened her eyes and sat up, it was near midnight She took almost an hour to come fully to her senses Then, when I had told her the whole story of the evening, she went up slowly to Shahji, untied his hands, and said, "Now go , go to bed "

After he had gone, she called Indra to her and placing his right hand on her head, said, "Swear, Indra, my brother, by my head, that you will never again set foot in this house Whatever may happen to us, do not have anything to do with us in future "

Indra remained speechless with surprise for a few moments Then his indignation flared up suddenly, "Indeed, and it's nothing to you that he attempted to murder me ? You turn sullen and angry because I kept him tied up That's all the thanks that I get from you ! Ungrateful wretches, both of you ! Come, Srikanta, we won't stay any more "

Didi sat silent, and unprotesting I did not then understand why I put down the five rupees near a post, unseen and in silence, and followed Indra As he went out of the courtyard, Indra shouted, "What decency or religion could one expect of a Hindu woman who has left her home to live with a Musalman ? You can go to the devil ; I won't have anything more to do with you I have washed my hands of your affairs once for all, rascally cheats that you are !" and he strode swiftly across the stretch of jungle

When we had taken our seats in the canoe, Indra began to row in silence at times wiping his eyes with his hands I could see that he was crying, and asked no questions.

We went past the cremation-ground, following the route we had taken on the first day, but no fear entered my mind this time. I was so bewildered and distraught that the thought of how I should enter our house at that hour of the night or what fate awaited me later never occurred to me

When we arrived at the landing *ghat* the night was almost over As I got down from the canoe, Indra said, "Go home, Srikanta, you are unlucky Whenever I have brought you with me some beastly trouble or other has arisen I won't ever call you to help me in anything again and don't you ever come near me again Go !" He pushed the canoe back into the deep water and disappeared out of sight, leaving me there on the bank staring in pained surprise at the deserted landing

VI

WHEN, WITHOUT ANY FAULT ON MY PART, I found myself forsaken by Indra, alone on the bank of the Ganges in that still, solemn night, I could not restrain my tears. So this was all the value he attached to my affection for him! I had followed him, unmindful of the strict restraints of our house but what was that to him? He had not hesitated to call me unlucky and useless, and certainly when he left me he had thought it a good riddance.

I cannot tell how much Indra's cruel indifference pained me. After this he did not seek me nor I him. If I met him accidentally in the street, I would look away from him, pretending that I had not seen him. This pretence of mine was as gall and wormwood to me but how much did it affect him? He was a leading spirit in our boys' world, he was captain of the football and cricket teams, the best gymnast in the gymnasium. What a number of disciples, admirers, and followers he had! And what was I? A mere nobody in comparison. But why had he called me his friend for a short time and then shut me out from his acquaintance, in the chilly world outside? I however made no effort to revive the link. How well I remember that when our common friends would tell wonderful stories about Indra I would hear them in perfect silence. Not by a single word did I ever hint that he knew me or that I knew anything about him. How well I had learned, even at that early age, the tragic fatality which ends friendship between the great and the small in this world. Perhaps, as I was to come in contact with many 'big' friends in later life, God had implanted in me the knowledge that it is perilous to overstep the limits of one's station in life when assessing the value of friendship to do so is to make your 'friend' your master and the bonds of friendship your

fetters Knowledge of this truth has mercifully always saved me from ignoble and shameful situations

Three or four months passed We had given each other up and whatever may have been the pangs and sorrows on each side, neither of us made any enquiry about the other It was at this time, in the midst of the *Kali-puja* holidays, that a stage was erected at the Dutts' house for the local amateur theatricals The play was going to be *Meghanad-vadh** I had often seen village operas but a theatrical play was an event for me This and the fact that, as a great favour, I had been allowed to lend a hand in preparing the stage, roused my enthusiasm to such a pitch that I gave up all my usual occupations and was indefatigable in my task Not only was I favoured by being allowed to help, but he who was to take the part of Rama, had himself once told me to hold a rope Accordingly I had high hopes that at night when other boys, peering through the holes of the canvas-walls of the green-room were pushed back the special favour of Rama would mean different treatment for me—perhaps he would single me out of the rabble and call me in once or twice But alas for all my arduous labours throughout the day, my recompense, after the lamps were lit, was nil Hour after hour I stood near the green-room door Ramchandra passed and re-passed me several times, but far from asking why I stood there, he never even gave me a nod of recognition Not once did he ask me why I was standing there Ungrateful Rama ! Had he no further need for a rope-holder ?

After ten o'clock, when the first bell rang to signal the beginning of the play, I joined the audience, feeling very hurt and disgusted with the whole affair, and occupied one of the seats in front But a few minutes sufficed to wipe off all my sorrow and disgust What a play it was ! I have seen many plays in life, but never another like that. Meghanad himself was a colossal affair . his body was about seven feet

* An episode of the Ramayana depicting the defeat and death of Ravana's son Meghanad at the hands of Lakshmana

in height, his circumference at least six feet People said that after his death his body would have to be taken to the burning-place in a bullock-cart he could not be carried on human shoulders Though I do not remember all the details of the play, I can remember this, that the heroism Meghanad displayed that night could not be matched by Haran Palsain of our village, even in the part of Bhima carrying a branch of the *sahanjan* tree on his shoulder, and gnashing his teeth with all his might

The curtain rose Someone appeared on the stage, I believe it was Lakshmana He was making a heroic declamation when all on a sudden Meghanad, at one bound, appeared before him The whole stage creaked and groaned and trembled five or six lamps which formed the footlights were overturned and extinguished The gilt belt which spanned Meghanad's girth snapped causing a sensation Some of the audience anxiously advised Meghanad to sit down on the stage, while others demanded the curtain, but our brave Meghanad was nothing if not resourceful he threw his bow down, and, holding up his trousers with his left hand, began to fight with a single arrow in his right

The duel was a histrionic achievement Whoever in real life saw a warrior fight such an unequal battle and win it too? For Meghanad did indeed vanquish his foe forcing him to flee for life

While I sat in rapt admiration of the extraordinary demonstration of warlike skill I felt the pressure of a finger on my back Turning my head I saw it was Indra. "Come, Srikanta," he whispered, "Didi wants to see you" In an instant I sat bolt upright and asked, "Where is she?"

"Come out of this I'll tell you" Once outside he said simply, "Come with me," and led the way

When we reached the *ghat*, I saw that Indra's boat was ready, both of us boarded it in silence, and we started

Once more we proceeded by the old water-way in the darkness, and then followed the jungle path till we came to Shahji's hut By that time the night was far spent

Didi was sitting beside a kerosene lamp, Shahji's head lying on her lap Near her feet stretched a huge, dead cobra

Briefly and in a low voice she told us what had happened A reward had been offered that day for catching a snake in somebody's house Shahji had caught the snake and had returned home just before dusk, already drunk on the reward he had got He had insisted, in spite of Didi's remonstrance, on playing for one of the snakes to dance As he put the snake into the *handi** he had brought his face near its mouth to bid it an affectionate goodnight, and the snake had bitten him in the neck

Didi wiped her eyes with the end of her *sari* "Srikanta," she said, "he knew at once that his hours were numbered He crushed the head of the snake with his heel, crying, 'Come, let us both die together !' and then holding its head down with his foot he stretched it out to its full length , and now they both lie dead together side by side !" With tender care she lifted the cloth that covered Shahji's face, and, touching his lips, already blue, with hers, she said with deep emotion, "It is well, Indranath ! I do not lay the slightest blame on God "

We two stood speechless. No one who felt the heart-rending anguish, the baffled longing and prayer, that were expressed in that voice, could ever forget it afterwards

"You are only children," she said after a pause, "but I have no one except you two So I ask you to do what you can for him before you go "

She pointed to the jungle to the south of the hut "There is a small space, Indranath, over there I have often thought that, if I were to die here I should like to lie in that place. In the morning you will lay him there he has suffered many sorrows in his life , now he will be at rest and find some peace "

"Didi, shall we have to *bury* Shahji ?" asked Indra

"Of course, my dear," she answered , "he was a Musalman, you know "

*Round, earthen pot

Indra put another question, "Didi, are you too a Musalman ?"

"Yes," she said, "of course I am a Musalman "

I could see that the reply hurt Indra a little He had not expected it He had really loved Didi and had harboured a secret hope in his heart that she was one of ourselves, a Hindu But I could not believe her even after her own avowal I could not think that she was not a Hindu's daughter

As soon as the night was over, Indra dug a grave in the place Didi had indicated and the three of us carried Shahji's body there and buried it It was a place overlooking the Ganges, formed by the erosion of the gravelly bank and well suited for a grave The river flowed past some forty feet below, and overhead was a screen of branches and wild creepers, a fit place in which to conceal one's treasure With heavy hearts we kept vigil by that bed of everlasting sleep, waiting for sunrise , meanwhile the soft murmur of the Ganges mingled with the earliest notes of the forest birds

Suddenly Didi threw herself on the grave and cried brokenly, "Mother Ganges, give me too a place at thy feet ! I have no other place to call my own !" How true this was I did not fully realise till two days later Indra glanced at me, and then, going up to the sorrow-stricken woman, he took her head in his lap and said, in a voice of infinite grief, "Didi, come to my home My mother is alive, and she will not treat you as a stranger but will take you to her heart You do not know how kind she is Come to her that is all I ask, Didi You are a Hindu's daughter, Didi, and on no account a Musalman "

Didi did not speak For some time she lay as if unconscious

Later, when Didi had roused herself, we all three took a bath in the Ganges Didi threw her iron bangle into the water, broke her bangles of lac, and obliterated with earth the vermilion mark in the parting of her hair As the sun rose she went back to her hut in the garb of a widow

She now told us for the first time that Shahji was her husband Indra was reluctant to believe this "But are you not a Hindu, Didi ?" he asked with doubt in his voice

"Yes, I am a Brahmin's daughter," said Didi "Shahji was also a Brahmin "

Indra remained silent for a while and then asked, "Why did he lose his caste ?"

"I cannot tell you just why," she replied "But when he lost his caste, I too lost mine in consequence A wife is but a partner in the husband's spiritual life I have never done anything to lose my caste on my own account I have never done anything forbidden "

"I have noticed that, Didi," said Indra, whose voice was now thick with emotion, "and that is why I have always wondered—forgive me, Didi, for this—how you were led into this manner of life But now I won't have any excuses, you must come to my home Let us start now "

Didi sat long in silence, considering. Then she raised her head and said, "I can not go anywhere now, Indranath "

"Why not, Didi ?"

"He has left some debts I can not go elsewhere without paying them off "

"I know that," said Indra angrily "He has left some debts in grog-shops and *ganja*-shops But what is that to you ? Let me see who dares ask you for payment ! Come with me and let me just see who stands in your way !"

Didi smiled even in her grief "You foolish boy," she said, "who can stand in my way but my own *dharma* ? Is not my husband's debt my own ? How will you keep that creditor of mine, my conscience, at bay ? Go home now, both of you I shall try to pay off my debts after selling what little I have got Come again to-morrow or the day after "

Thus far I had not spoken I now said, "Didi, I have got four or five rupees more at my home , may I bring them ?" Before I had finished speaking she stood up, and, drawing me to her bosom as if I were a little child, she kissed my forehead "No, my dear," she said, "I do not want them I have not forgotten those five rupees you left

with me the other day I shall never forget your kindness I bless you, my child," and tears came pouring down her cheeks, "that God may thus ever reside in your heart and guide you to help the poor"

About eight o'clock we started homewards, and Didi came with us up to the lane Holding Indra by the hand she said, "Indranath, I have given my blessings to Srikanta, but I dare not bless you, for you are beyond the reach of blessings But my heart has dedicated you, my brother, at the feet of God May He make you His own"

She had understood him Disregarding her protests, Indra knelt down before her and put the dust of her feet on his head "Didi," he said, on the verge of tears, "I do not like to leave you alone here in the jungle I feel that I shall never see you again"

Didi made no reply She turned away suddenly and wiped her eyes then she walked back towards her desolate hut We stood looking at her as long as she was visible But not once did she turn her head when she disappeared out of sight her head was still bent down

Three days later, as I was leaving school in the afternoon, I saw Indra standing near the gate His face was very wan and haggard : he wore no shoes and was covered with dust His appearance filled me with misgiving he belonged to a wealthy family, and was usually rather fastidious about his appearance and clothes I had never seen him like this before He made a sign to me to come to the playground, and when I met him there he said, "Didi is gone, she has gone somewhere" He avoided my eyes, "I have been searching for her since yesterday, but I have found no trace of her anywhere She left a letter for you, here it is," and he thrust a folded piece of yellow paper into my hand and left me quickly

I sat down at once and, unfolding the piece of paper, began to read Though at this interval of time I cannot remember everything that was written in it, I can remember most of it Didi had written, "Srikanta, I send you my blessings before I go Not only to-day, but as long as I live, I shall always bless you both But do not grieve for me I know that Indra will search for me, but you must dissuade

him. I have no hope that you will understand everything I am writing at this age But I am leaving this letter in the hope that you will understand some day I could have told you all about myself in person and yet I have never been able to do so though I have tried more than once Unless I tell you to-day, my story will remain untold for ever It is not mine alone, it is my husband's as well That again, is not a pleasant story I cannot say how much I have sinned in this life, but I have no doubt that the sins of my past lives must have been many Whenever I have tried to tell my story I have thought that I ought not to add to my sins by speaking ill of my husband He is now no more Yet I do not think that speaking about him would be any less a sin Still I cannot take leave of you unless I tell you the story of my sorrowful life

"Srikanta, your poor Didi's name is Annada I do not reveal my husband's name you will understand why when you have read this letter to the end My father was a rich man He had no sons, only another daughter and myself My father married me to a poor man whom he kept at his house, and set out to educate and make a man of He succeeded in educating him, but not in making a man of him My elder sister had lost her husband and was living with us My husband killed her and disappeared You are too young to understand why he did this evil deed but you will understand some day I cannot express all that I suffered, all my poignant shame Still your Didi endured it all, though the pain, the fire of indignity, which my husband kindled in my breast has not yet abated after all these years Let that pass. Seven years afterwards, I saw him again He was playing to a snake before our house, in the garb in which you have seen him No one else could recognize him, but I did he could not deceive my eyes He said that he braved the danger of recognition for my sake alone That was a lie, I knew Yet one dark night when all were asleep, I opened a back-door and left my father's house for the sake of my husband Everyone heard and everyone believed that Annada had run away to a life of ignominy and shame I shall have to bear the burden of this shame throughout my life There is no help for it. While my father was alive I could not go back and tell my story. I

knew him, he would never have forgiven the murderer of his child Though my fear for my husband no longer exists and I could, therefore, go and tell him my story now, who would believe me after all these years? So I have no place any longer in my father's home Besides, I am a Musalman

"I have discharged my husband's debts I have sold two gold ear-rings which I kept hidden from him I have not spent the five rupees you gave me I have left them with the grocer whose shop stands on the main road at the crossing He will give them to you if you ask him for them My dear brother, do not reproach me for this I am returning your rupees, it is true, but I am taking with me your beautiful young heart And I ask of you one thing, dear Srikanta, before I go Do not distress yourself by thinking about me Know that wherever I may be, I shall be well, for after so much suffering and sorrow new sufferings do not hurt me Your Didi has truly become insensible to all pain I cannot find words for blessing you, my two young brothers, I will say only this, if God hears the prayers of an honest woman, your friendship will ever remain to you both an inviolable treasure

"Your sister,
Annada"

VII

I WENT TO THE GROCER'S SHOP WHEN THE grocer heard why I had come, he brought out a bundle wrapped up in a piece of cloth, and untying it showed me a pair of gold ear-rings and five rupees He gave the rupees to me and said, "She sold the ear-rings to me for twenty-one rupees, and after paying for Shahji's debts she went away, though I could not say where " He gave an account of the different debts and added, "She had only five and a half annas left to take with her "

With this paltry sum as her only support, the helpless and lonely woman had started out on her wanderings!

Lest the two boys who had loved her so dearly should make futile attempts to help her, and be grieved at their futility, she had not let them know when she started on her journey I felt particularly aggrieved that she had declined to take my five rupees What pleasure and pride I had taken in the thought that my money had been useful to her! Now all that pride and pleasure vanished in a moment In my wounded pride I could not help giving way to tears, to conceal which I had to leave the old grocer quickly "She has taken help form Indra again and again," I said to myself, "but from me she will take nothing she has returned the only thing that I could give her "

As I grew older my resentment faded, and I came to wonder how it was that I could think myself worthy of giving her anything She was a burning flame reducing to ashes everything that was consigned to her, and that was why, perhaps, she thought it best to return my paltry gift As for Indra, he was surely made of different stuff, and had the right to give where I had none Besides, Didi had taken his money for the sake of one who now needed gifts no longer

Since Didi left us I have wandered in many places but I have never again seen or heard of her Nevertheless I still carry in my heart the image of her lovely face with its sweet, sad smile Whenever I think of her and bow down my head to her blessed memory, I cannot help saying, "What strange judgment is thine, O God! I can see that in this land, famous for ideal wives, sufferings have often heightened the glory of wifely constancy and love I can see that it is Thy will that the sorrows of all such wives become transmuted into an eternal halo which makes their memory a constant inspiration to others But why didst Thou ordain such an ironical destiny for my Didi? Why should she, who had been faithful to her husband till his death, have her pure brow branded with the taint of infidelity and be banished from all society? What did she not sacrifice—her caste, her faith, society, honour, her all? I still live as a witness of her sufferings, but I do not complain of them But she who ranks with Sita and Savitri,—what did her parents and relatives, her friends and foes, think her to be to the end of their lives? An unfaithful wife and an abandoned woman! What hast Thou gained in this, O God, and what has the world gained?"

If I could only have known who her family and friends were! No matter how far away they lived I would have gone to them and would have said, "This was the Annada you know! Such was the imperishable story of her suffering life! If you can remember her whom you have regarded as a sinful woman and take her name once every morning, it will redeem you from many of your sins"

But I have learnt a great truth I have already said once that I find it hard to believe evil of any woman When I remember my Didi I am struck by the thought that nothing is impossible in the world in which she has left such an evil repute Except for myself (and of course Him who is the eternal witness of all virtues and sins,) there is none in the wide world who remembers her with the least affection I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that it is better to err by disbelief in the evil reputation of a woman than to commit the grievous sin of believing therein

After Didi's disappearance I did not see Indra for a long time

Whenever I went to the river I saw his dinghy lapping idly on the water in the blazing sun, but Indra was not to be seen However, he and I were to have one more trip in that dinghy, our last trip together Neither he nor I ever used the dinghy again I remember that trip clearly, not only because it was our last, but because it furnished a striking example of how completely selfish a human being can be Let me relate the story

It was an intensely chilly winter evening showers during the day had given a sharp edge to the piercing cold A full moon rode high in the clear heavens Indra suddenly appeared, as if out of the blue "Will you come to see a play!" he asked A play was a rare treat, I jumped at the offer "Well then, get dressed and come along to our house at once " It took me only five minutes to wrap a shawl round my shoulders and run out of the house We had to make the journey by train I thought we were to drive to the station in Indra's father's carriage and that was why he had wanted me to hurry But Indra announced that we should have to go in his dinghy This damped my ardour considerably We should have to go against the stream, which meant hard work and a great deal of delay We might even be too late for the play "Never fear," said Indra "the wind is strong and we shan't be late My *Natun-da** has just arrived from Calcutta, he wants to go by the river "

Having hoisted the sail and got the canoe ready I waited for Indra and his Natun-da They came very late, and my first glimpse of Natun-da was not reassuring He was a Calcutta dandy, that is to say a dandy *per excellence* He came attired in silk socks, patent leather slippers and a heavy overcoat, with a woollen comforter round his neck, gloves on his hands and a cap on his head there was no end to

*Literally *'new brother'* When *'big brother,' 'middle brother', 'third brother'* have arrived, it is not uncommon to call the next one just *'new brother'* Indranath must have had several cousins older than Natun-da —*Trans.*

his precautions against the biting west wind Having graciously remarked that our dinghy was "rotten," he boarded it with great difficulty, leaning on Indra's shoulder and supporting himself with my proffered hand, and with great care sat down in the centre of the canoe, the picture of high disdain

"What is your name, eh?"

"Srikanta," I said timidly

"Srikanta!" he said, contemptuously, showing his teeth "Kanta will do Just prepare a smoke for me, will you? Indra, where have you kept the *hookah* and the *chilam?* Give them to this boy let him prepare a smoke"

The lordly hauteur of his gesture terrified me and abashed Indra "Come here and hold the rudder," said Indra to me "I'll prepare the smoke"

Without a word I began to perpare the *chilam* For Indra's Natun-da was a cousin on the mother's side and a resident of Calcutta, and had recently passed the Intermediate Examination in Arts But his demeanour had permanently disturbed my peace of mind When I had handed him the *hookah* his face relaxed and as he started smoking he asked, "Well, where do you live, Kanta? What is that black thing you have got on your shoulders? A shawl, is it? What a fine shawl, to be sure! Ugh, it has a greasy smell that would make the dirtiest street Arab run! Just spread it here, will you? It'll make a comfortable seat"

"Take my shawl, Natun-da I am not cold at all," Indra quickly threw his shawl to him Natun-da settled comfortably on it and went on smoking in a far more contented humour

It being winter the Ganges was not very wide, we reached the other bank in half an hour But the wind dropped at once, and Indra said anxiously, "Natun-da, we are in a fix the wind has dropped and the sail is no use now"

"Let this young fellow pull, then,' replied Natun-da coolly Indra smiled at the inexperience of his town-bred relative, explaining, "Pull! no one could pull against this current We'll just have to go back, that's all"

Natun-da suddenly blazed into anger "Why did you ever bring me in this damned dinghy of yours? You've *got* to take me there somehow I tell you, you must! I've got to play the harmonium! They've specially asked me to do it"

"They'll find someone to play the harmonium all right," Indra replied. "The play won't be held up if you can't go, Natun-da"

"What, who can play the harmonium in this God forsaken, barbarous place of yours? No, you 've got to reach me there somehow, I tell you" He made a grimace that made my gorge rise (Later I had the privilege of hearing him play the harmonium, too, but the less I say about that the better)

Realizing the sad plight of Indra, I said, almost in a whisper, "What about a tow, Indra?" I had hardly finished speaking when Natun-da snarled, "What about a tow, eh? And when will you set about it, you dumb sheep?"

Indra and I towed in turn Over high banks and low, and often at the ice-cold water's rim, we towed the little canoe along At intervals we had to stop to refill the *chilam* with tobacco for our exquisite guest who never offered us the slightest help in our exhausting labour Once Indra suggested his holding the rudder, and he replied that he would catch pneumonia by taking his gloves off in the cold "I did not mean you should take them off," Indra explained mildly

"Just so! You meant I should ruin them for good, you silly ass!"

In fact I have seldom had the misfortune to come across a man so utterly self-centred All the pains that we took to gratify his paltry whims did not touch him in the least, though his age after all was not much greater than ours Afraid of catching cold and spoiling his valuable overcoat, he sat motionless in the canoe, wearing us to death with his numerous orders

And now another complication arose The crisp night air had given our passenger an appetite, which was whetted by his incessant shouting It was already ten, the information that it would be two o'clock in the morning before we could arrive at the theatre made him perfectly furious. At about eleven Natun-da asked wearily, "Isn't there

any village hereabouts? Can't we get a bit of fried rice or something to eat?"

"There's a big village a short way up, Natun-da you'll get everything there"

"Then let's stop there Go on, why don't you pull, kid? Got your wind up, eh? Don't you ever eat anything? Indra, will you tell that pup of yours to pull a bit harder?"

Neither Indra nor I made any reply Proceeding at our former pace we soon came to a village The bank was sloping, it made a gentle promontory as it came down to the water We pulled the canoe into a small creek and heaved a sigh of relief

"One must stretch one's limbs a bit," said our dandy "I must get down" So Indra took him on his shoulders and set him down on the white, sandy bank where he paced up and down in the moonlight

We set out for the village in order to find means to appease his hunger We knew it would not be at all easy to get eatables in such a small place at that hour, but we also realized that to protest or argue would be futile Natun-da seemed unwilling to be left alone "Then why not come along with us?" asked Indra "You'll probably feel afraid here, all alone Nobody is likely to take away our dinghy Come on, Natun-da!"

"Afraid!" said Natun-da with a sneering grimace "We boys of *Darzipara** don't fear death, my dear fellows! But it is more than we can do to go near the filthy houses of these low people The very smell of them makes us sick" What he really wanted was that I should stay with him and keep stoking his *chilam* for his smoke But I had been so much disgusted by his behaviour that even though Indra once hinted at his wish, I paid no heed to it, being determined not to remain in his company Indra and I went away together

* A Calcutta street

The exquisite of Calcutta started a ditty clapping his hands to keep time, "Twinkling cups of wine—"

As we walked toward the village, his effeminate voice trailed us with its nasal twang Indra was ashamed of his cousin's conduct and said apologetically, "Townsfolk cannot stand this cold country air as we can, don't you see, Srikanta?"

"H'm!" said I

Indra, hoping perhaps to win me over, then began a recital of Natun-da's great intellectual attainments, informing me that he would soon pass his B A Examination and become a Deputy Collector I do not know what district he graces now as Deputy Collector or whether he ever succeeded in becoming one, and yet I must believe he did, for one hears so much in Bengal of the fine doings of Deputies! He was just budding into manhood then, a season when by all accounts one's sympathies widen and the outlook becomes liberal as it never is at any other period. Yet the few hours of our intercourse brought an exhibition of qualities which I shall never forget! Mercifully, such specimens are rare, otherwise the world would have been reduced to a regular police station *

But it is necessary to inform my readers that even the gods were displeased with him Indra knew all the lanes, by-ways, shops, and houses of the village, and soon found the grocer's store but it was closed and the grocer was fast asleep inside, with doors and windows tightly barred It is impossible for me to convey an adequate notion of the depth of these country people's slumber to anyone who has not known it at first hand Being neither the dyspeptic landholder with nothing to do nor the careworn Bengali *bourgeois* whose chief worry is the marriage of numerous daughters, they know how to sleep Once they have stretched themselves out on their rough cots, at the end of their day's toil, it is almost impossible to wake them by the ordinary

* Neither the civil administration, nor the police in this country enjoy a high reputation for courtesy or service —*Trans.*

methods of shouting and knocking at the door it seems that nothing short of setting their houses on fire will rouse them from their slumber

Outside the store, we shouted ourselves hoarse and did everything else we could think of to awaken those inside it was all to no avail We returned to the river bank But Heavens! Where was our hero of Darzipara? As far as we could see in the moonlight there was not a single soul beside ourselves in sight The dinghy was still there, but where had Natun-da gone to? Both of us shouted with all our strength, "Natun-da!" Our own voices answered us, echoing back from the high banks We knew that people had seen wolves in these parts on winter nights and the peasants used at times to be troubled by their depredations All at once Indra said, "What if wolves have fallen on him?" My hair stood on end Natun-da's outrageous behaviour had certainly angered me, but even for him I could never have desired such a terrible fate

Both of us suddenly saw something shining in the moonlight on the sands at some distance Going up to it, we found that it was one of Natun-da's prized patent leather slippers Indra threw himself on the damp sands, crying, "Srikanta, his mother is staying with us too I can't go back home!" Everything was as clear as daylight to me I remembered that while we were hollering over there in our futile attempt to rouse the grocer, we had heard the barking of dogs They had, no doubt, been trying to bring to the notice of the village the tragedy that was happening before their eyes Even now we could hear their barking at a distance We had no doubt in our minds that they were howling over that spot where the wolves had devoured Natun-da

Indra suddenly stood up and said, "I'm going over there" I caught hold of his hands and said, "Don't be a lunatic, Indra" Indra made no reply but came back to the dinghy and took out the pole With this on his shoulder and his open knife in his left hand he started, saying, "You stay here, Srikanta If I don't come back, go home and tell them what happened I am off"

His face was very pale, but his eyes were glowing with excitement and determination I knew him very well This was no boyish boast, easily brought to nothing at the first sign of real danger I knew

that it would be impossible to dissuade him As he set off I too took up a piece of bamboo and followed him Indra turned round and catching hold of my hand, said, "Are you mad, Srikanta? It isn't your fault at all Why should you come?"

"It isn't your fault either," I retorted, tears almost starting from my eyes "so why should *you* go?"

Indra pulled the piece of bamboo out of my hand and threw it into the canoe, saying, "No, it isn't my fault either I didn't want to bring Natun-da with me But I can't return without him, and I must go "

So must I too For I was no coward either. So I took up the piece of bamboo again and without further discussion we both pushed forward "Don't try to run over the sand, it is no use," said Indra "you will only stumble into the water "

There was a sand-dune in front of us As we passed over it, we saw five or six dogs barking at some distance from us close to the water's edge Except for the dogs no other creature was in sight, no wolf, not even a jackal As we approached cautiously we saw that they were guarding some black object in the river Indra shouted, "Natun-da!"

"I am here," came Natun-da's sobbing voice indistinctly from the water

We ran as fast as our legs would carry us The dogs stood aside and Indra jumped into the river When he dragged his Calcutta cousin in a half-swooning condition out of the neck-deep water, Natun-da still had on one of his sumptuous patent leathers, besides his overcoat, gloves, comforter, and cap, all soaked and swollen with water

After we had left him, the village dogs, roused by his nasal musical and his wonderful costume, had made a shameful assault on our hero He had run thus far, and, seeing no other means of defending himself, had jumped into the river Standing neck-deep in this ice-cold water for half an hour on an intensely cold night, he had done sufficient penance for his previous sins But it was no easy task for us to revive him from the effects of the penance What is most surprising, however, is that the first words he spoke after we had landed him on the bank were, "Where is my other pump?"

As soon as we told him that it was behind the dune, he forgot all his sorrows, roused himself, and started off with the intention of retrieving it with the least possible delay On the way he expressed repeated regrets for his coat, his comforter, his socks and his gloves, and all the way till we could reach him to his destination he went on reviling us as fools, for having stripped them off him in such a hurry If we had only left them on, he complained, they would not have been soiled in the dust and the dirt We were no better than rustic clods, we had never seen such things—this was the burden of his refrain as he poured out his grievances in an unceasing stream In his grief for his gorgeous clothes he had forgotten the claims of his body which a short while ago he had been afraid of exposing to a single drop of water

It was past two o'clock when our dinghy pulled up again at our landing Apparelled in Indra's shawl, and girdled with mine, the foul smell of which he had previously remarked upon, Natun-da hurried home, repeatedly giving it as his deliberate opinion that my shawl was too nauseating to use as a door-mat However that may have been, we were full of joy at the thought that instead of falling a prey to wolves he had returned intact Submitting to his reiterated abuse and unceasing insolence with smiling faces, we concluded our eventful trip by returning home clad only in our *dhotis* and trembling in every limb in that frosty, winter night Thus ended our last trip in the dinghy We were never to set foot in it again

VIII

PYARI

AS I WRITE DOWN THESE RECORDS OF MY PAST life I often wonder who gave the chaotic elements of my experience the order and the arrangement that they possess in my memory They did not all occur in the order in which I am now relating them Nor can I say that all the links are there Some have dropped, and yet the chain of my memory has not snapped Who is it that repairs the breaches and keeps it intact as ever?

A second wonder is that here, in the region of my memory, the big things do not overshadow the little things If they did, one would remember only the big and important incidents of one's life But that is not the case As I think of my youth and childhood, many little things come into my mind, things that somehow have taken a disproportionately tenacious hold of it, while bigger things have withered and faded out The same thing has happened, I am afraid, in this narrative of mine many a trifle has bulked large, while bigger events have passed into oblivion It is not for me, however, to explain these anomalies of the human mind, I content myself with merely noting this strange fact

I recall to-day how one of these insignificant events, occurring most casually, led to one of the most significant experiences of my life I am going to tell the story It would be difficult to describe or characterise it in advance, for if I were to say that it is a love story, that might not be strictly inaccurate, but it might give a wrong bias or false colouring to my story I must, therefore, be very careful.

Many years had passed since Didi had disappeared, and her face, the very recollection of which, for some reason not understood by

me, used to be a curb to the impetuosities of my early youth, was growing dim in my memory

On that occasion I was a guest at a *shikar* party given by a Rajkumar I had been his school-mate and had often secretly done his mathematical exercises for him, so we had been great friends After the matriculation class we had separated I knew that princes had proverbially short memories, so I never dreamed that he would write to me We met by the merest chance He had just attained majority, and a large fortune had come to him with the inevitable consequences Someone had told him (it was an exaggerated report) that I was a crack shot with a rifle, and he had further invested me with so many other desirable qualifications that I was thought fit to belong to the circle of his intimate friends It is true that one's friends and relations sometimes exaggerate one's virtues and it would be unbecoming of me to say that I deserved my reputation At least a little modesty is an excellent thing to have As our *shastras* tell us never to disobey the summons of kings and princes, I could not but obey I went An elephant sent by the kumar awaited me at the station After a ride of some twenty miles I came upon an encampment which even the most fastidious could not but count worthy of a kumar who had risen above the trammels of his minority Five tents had been pitched one for his highness, one for his friends, one for the servants, the fourth to serve as a dining-tent, while the fifth was set apart at some distance for the use of a couple of *baijis** and their attendants

It was night already, and on entering the kumar's tent I could see that the entertainment which was going on had commenced some time earlier The kumar accorded me a very warm welcome, though when he attempted to rise from his seat to show me greater honour, he could only sink back futher into the cushions at his back His friends welcomed me with indistinct but glad murmurs of emotion I was a complete stranger to them, but in the condition they were in they stood in no need of formal introduction

* Dancing and singing girls

The *baiji* who was singing had come from Patna on a profitable contract for two weeks I must, however, admit that the kumar's choice did credit to his taste and judgment She was beautiful and sweet-voiced, and really understood her art The song stopped as I entered Then, after the inevitable exchange of courtesies appropriate to the occasion, the kumar requested me to call for the music that I liked. This embarrassed me at first but I soon realised that I alone possessed any ear for music in a company where all the rest were, so far as aesthetic appreciation was concerned, no better than buffaloes

Soon the *baiji* brightened up It is possible of course to do almost anything for money But I could see that in this assembly of dolts it was really painful for her to give an exhibition of her art She seemed quite relieved to get one person who could appreciate it at last From then on until late that night she seemed to be employing all her art, her exquisite voice, her flowerlike beauty for my sake alone, keeping down with her liquid melodies the foul atmosphere of crude and ugly animalism that surrounded me And then at last her song died away and stopped

The *baiji* belonged to Patna and her name was Pyari Perhaps never in her life had she sung with a deeper emotion or finer sincerity than on that night, and I had listened as one enthralled When she stopped I could only say, "Excellent"

Pyari looked down and smiling put her folded palms to her forehead in acknowledgement of the bald compliment, she did not *salaam* me, Musalman fashion, as is customary with most singers The musical *soiree* had come to an end

Some of those present were asleep, some drowsy, most of them were half-seas over with drink As the *baiji* was going out of the tent with her attendants, I could not help saying, in the excess of my delight in Hindustani, "*Baiji*, I congratulate myself that I shall have the privilege of hearing you sing every day for two weeks"

She stopped abruptly, and then, moving a little towards me, said in a very low voice and in clear Bengali, "I must sing, for I have been paid But how can you, Sir, think of staying in this company for a fortnight? If I were you I would go away tomorrow"

I was taken by surprise at this reply Before I could think of anything to say, she had left the tent Next morning His Highness issued forth in great state on a hunting expedition Most prominent were the arrangements for feasting and drinking Ten shikaris were to accompany him, the guns numbering fifteen, of which six were rifles The banks of a river which had almost dried up constituted our hunting ground On one bank was a village, the other bank was a sandy stretch On the nearer bank there were large silk-cotton trees, extending over two miles, the far bank was covered with scattered shrubs of *kash* and clumps of elephant grass I saw a few doves on some of the silk-cotton trees, and a couple of creatures, probably Brahminy ducks, swimming in the moribund stream close by

A lively discussion followed as to which direction each gun should take, in the course of which all took the opportunity of infusing fresh vigour into their systems with a peg or two I put my gun down on the ground The *baiji's* taunt had already made my mind uneasy and now the scene of our sport aroused my profound disgust

"What a dull fellow you are to-day, Kanta, to be sure," said the kumar "What are you doing? Why do you put your gun down?"

"I don't kill birds"

"What's that? But why not?"

"I haven't handled a shot-gun since I grew a moustache I have forgotten how to use it"

His Highness was convulsed with laughter How much of his glee was due to drink is hard to say

Saraju was the leader of the *shikar*-party and the chief ornament of the prince's retinue I had heard, soon after my arrival, of his unerring marksmanship His face flushed scarlet He asked me angrily, "Is there any shame in shooting birds?"

My temper was not quite under control, so I replied, "No, not for everyone, but for me there is" I said hurriedly to the kumar, "Your highness, I don't feel very well," and returned to the tent without caring to notice who smiled or grimaced behind my back

I had just lain down on the mattress spread out on the floor and had lighted a cigarette after ordering a cup of tea, when a servant entered and respectfully informed me that the *baiji* desired to have an interview with me This was what I was hoping for as well as dreading

"What for?" I asked

"I don't know, sir"

"Who are you?"

"I am her butler, sir"

"Are you a Bengali?"

"Yes, sir, Pramanik* by caste My name is Ratan, sir"

"Is the *baiji* a Hindu?"

"Should I, sir, have served under her, otherwise?" Ratan answered smilingly

Ratan accompanied me as far as his mistress's tent and after showing me the entrance disappeared Raising the curtain I went in and saw that the *baiji* awaited me alone The dancer's gown and scraf† that she had worn on the previous night had deceived me, but now I had no difficulty in seeing that, whoever she might be, she was a Bengali She sat, dressed in a silk *sari*, on a carpet of great value Her hair, still wet after her bath, was spread on her back, near her were paraphernalia necessary for the preparation of betel, and a *hookah* had been kept in front On seeing me enter, she got up and, indicating a seat with a smile, said, "Please sit down No, I won't smoke before you Ratan, take this *hookah* away! Why, won't you sit down?"

Ratan came in and removed the *hookah* "I know you smoke," the *baiji* said, "but what can I offer you? What you may or may not do at other places is no concern of mine But I could not offer you my own *hookah* I will get you some cigars Ratan!"

* Pramanik, barber It is an occupational caste in Bengal, but they do not confine themselves to the barber's profession alone

† The dress generally worn by upcountry Muslaman singers

"Don't trouble, I don't need any cigars , I have got some with me "

"You have ? Well then, just sit down quietly, please, for I have much to tell you Nobody knows how God gets people to meet at unexpected places You went out to the *shikar* what made you return so soon ?"

"I did not like it "

"Just so you wouldn't What a cruel race men-folk are! They know best what pleasure they get in killing harmless creatures for nothing Is your father well ?"

"Father is dead "

"I am very sorry And your mother ?"

"She went before him "

"Oh, that is how—" and the *baiji* heaved a sigh and fixed her eyes on me I seem to feel that her eyes, for one brief instant, grew moist in sympathy But perhaps that was an illusion Yet when she next spoke I could not mistake the fact that the frivolous and coquettish tone of this keen-witted woman had really become tender "Then," she said, "you haven't got a soul who really cares for you and looks after you ? Are you still with your aunt ? Where else would you go, after all ? You haven't married, I can see that Are you studying at college ? Or have you finished that also ?"

I had borne with her curiosity and her string of queries in patience But her last question annoyed me "Well, and who are you ?" I asked rudely "I don't remember ever having seen you before Why do you wish to know so much about me ? Will it profit you anything to know all this ?"

Pyari did not get angry at this outburst of mine she merely smiled "Are profit and loss the only things in this world ? Is there nothing like natural feeling, affection, or love ? My name is Pyari . but since you cannot recognise me by my face, could you do so if you heard the nickname of my childhood ? I don't of course come from your village "

"Where is your home then?"

"No, I won't tell you that."

"Won't you tell me your father's name?"

The *baiji* pressed her tongue between her teeth, and said, "He is in heaven now. Alas, how can I utter his name with this sinful tongue of mine?"

I grew impatient and said, "If you can't, perhaps you can say how you came to recognise me?"

Pyari saw the state of mind I was in, and smiled archly. "No, I don't mind telling you. But would you find it possible to believe me?"

"Let me hear it first."

"My evil genius made me recognise you, what else could it be? It is fortunate for me that the sun has dried up all the tears you made me shed or they would have formed a pool, a big pool. Can you recognize me now, my good sir?"

Indeed, I could not recognize her. But that was my own fault entirely. My memory was to blame. I noticed that Pyari's lips had a way of curving up, giving an impression that everything she said was in banter and that she was laughing inwardly. I could not remember where I had seen those lips before. As it was, I could say nothing.

After a few moments' silence Pyari laughed aloud, and it seemed to me all of a sudden that her laughter concealed embarrassment. "No, sir, you are not so foolish as I thought," she said. "It has not escaped you that this is a way of speaking that I have, but many people with cleverer heads than yours have been taken in by my words. And if you are so clever, why have you adopted the profession of a parasite? The noble profession of a hanger-on is not for such as you. You had better leave the place instantly."

Hot anger surged up within me, but I refrained from giving expression to it. "Well," I said quietly, "I must regard myself as fortunate so long as I am in somebody's service. Something to do is better than nothing, don't you agree? Now I'll take leave or people outside will really suspect something."

"After all," the *baiji* answered, "why should you worry? If people do have such suspicions, I hardly think you would find it a matter for regret."

I stalked to the door without answering her. As I reached it she suddenly burst into a peal of laughter. "Don't you forget, my dear," she said mockingly, "to tell that story of my pool of tears! Properly told in the circle of your friends or before his highness and his satellites, it might even turn the scale of your fortune."

I left her tent without saying another word, but the woman's coarse banter and shameless laughter continued to torment me like the sting of a scorpion.

Going back to my tent I drank a cup of tea and lit a cigar. As my brain cooled, I began to think, "Who is this woman?" I could distinctly remember the facts of my life as far back as my fifth year, and yet, so far as I could see, there was nothing to suggest her. At the same time it was clear that she knew me well, she even knew about my aunt. She knew also that I was poor. What designs could she have on me? It was equally clear, however, that she wanted me away with all her heart. And yet why was she interested in my staying or going? She had said 'Are profit and loss the only things in this world? Is there nothing like affection or love?' I could not help smiling at the thought of these words which she, whom I had never seen before, had uttered so glibly. But, most of all, her parting words of derision rankled incessantly.

Towards evening the kumar and his friends returned from their sport. I heard from an attendant that the bag consisted of eight doves. The prince sent for me but I feigned illness and lay in bed, whence, till late at night, I could hear Pyari's songs and the drunken appreciation of the party.

After this, three or four days dragged by in almost uninterrupted monotony. I say "almost" because everything except the daily *shikar* was invariably the same. I soon observed a rapidly waning enthusiasm for *shikar*; whether there was an unconscious connection between this and Pyari's distaste for it, I cannot say. No one seemed willing to

stir out of the tents But they did not want me to go away There was no special reason for me to wish to bolt except the disgust I had conceived for the *bayi* Her presence affected me like a physical assault, I only felt relief when I could get away from her If I could not do that, I had to look somewhere else, talk to someone, or in some such way distract my attention. I could feel that every moment she was trying to meet my eyes The first day or two she had attempted a few jokes at my expense, but my attitude made her give up all levity

It was a Saturday Things had grown perfectly intolerable to me As I had made up my mind to go after dinner, music had been arranged for the afternoon The *bayi* had tired, and to fill the gap someone had started telling ghost stories In an instant we all gathered around the speaker.

At first I was not much attracted by the story but soon I sat up and was listening greedily The speaker was an elderly gentleman from the village He knew the delicate art of story-telling to perfection He was saying, "If any gentleman here disbelieves in the spirit-world, let him have all his doubts set at rest for ever to-night in this very village To-night will be a moonless Saturday night, and, whatever kind of man he may be, a saint or a sinner, a Brahmin or a Sudra, whether he goes alone or in the company of others, if he visits the cremation-grounds of the village to-night, he will not go in vain Not only will he see spirits wandering, he will also hear their voices and can, if he likes, hold converse with them " I remembered the exploits and adventures of my boyhood and burst into laughter The old man looked towards me and said, "Please come here " When I went to him he asked me gravely, "You do not believe in ghosts?"

"No "

"Why do you not? Is there any special reason for your disbelief?"

"No."

"Well, then, there are holy men in this village of ours who have seen them with their own eyes And because you have read a few pages of English, you think fit to disbelieve me and laugh in my face I had forgotten, though, that Bengalis are atheists and unbelievers "

I was surprised at the turn the matter had taken "My dear sir," I said, "I do not wish to argue about this matter My belief is my own Whether I be an atheist or not, I do not believe in ghosts Those who say they have seen them have either been deceived or are liars that it my belief"

Suddenly the old gentleman caught hold of my right hand and asked, "Will you go to the cremation-grounds to-night?"

"I will," I replied laughing "I have gone to many cremation-grounds on many nights since my boyhood"

Hot with anger, the old gentleman began to relate the terrors of the local cremation-ground, a description that seemed to freeze his audience to the very marrow "These cremation-grounds," he said, "have a terror-inspiring quality all their own One can count human skulls by the thousand there Every night the goddess of the dead, Bhairavi, whose name means the Terrible One, comes with her ghostly attendants and plays with the skulls And many a time have the resounding peals of their grim laughter caused the hearts of unbelieving Englishmen and of white magistrates and judges to fail" He went on recounting his awful stories with such consummate art that some of the company felt their flesh turn cold, though it was broad daylight and the tent was full of people Glancing sideways I found that Pyari had come up close to me and was listening tensely

After he had finished his account of the cremation-ground the speaker looked at me disdainfully and asked, "Well, sir, do you still intend to go?"

"Of course I do"

"You do! Well, as you please but if you lose your life—"

"No, my dear sir, no," I said laughing "If I lose my life the blame will not be upon you You needn't worry But I will not go to an unknown place unarmed I shall take my gun with me"

After this, the conversation was directed against me, and, as it was becoming personal, I left the tent The topics under discussion were hardly congenial my aversion to killing birds coupled with my partiality for shooting ghosts, the fact that Bengalis read English and

flouted the Hindu *shastras*, their impiousness in eating fowl and chicken, their boastfulness in word and cowardice in action, their tendency to faint with fright at the merest bluster,—these and kindred subjects now occupied the attention of the company In other words, they devoted themselves to the type of conversation that delights the souls of our princes and chiefs, being "supremely intellectual" and yet not too subtle for them to take part in

There was only one amongst them who admitted that he knew nothing of hunting, he was a man of few words, and he drank less than the others His name was Purushottam He came to me in the evening and said he would like to come with me, adding smilingly that he had never before seen a ghost and would not lose the fine opportunity that had presented itself I asked him, "Don't you believe in ghosts?"

"Of course not"

"But why don't you?"

"Because I don't," he said, and repeated the familiar arguments against the existence of spirits But I did not want to take him with me so easily, as many years' experience had taught me that this was not a matter for argument, but rather a question of how a person's subconscious reacted to it Even those who denied the existence of ghosts intellectually were known to have succumbed to the terrors of the unknown when the testing time came

But Purushottam would not leave me Tucking up the end of his *dhoti* behind him and holding his thick bamboo stick against his left shoulder he said, "Srikanta Babu, you can leave your fun, but so long as I hold this stick in my hand neither ghost nor goblin will be able to come near me"

"But the question is, will the stick remain in your hand at the proper time?"

"You will see that for yourself. We have about two miles to go, and must start by eleven"

His zeal to accompany me struck me as somewhat excessive

There was still one hour before I was to start, and I was pacing to and fro in front of my tent and turning the matter over in my mind.

My master in adventure had early taught me to discard all fear in matters like this. I remembered that night when I was still a boy and Indra had said to me, "Srikanta, take the name of Rama mentally: that boy is sitting behind me." I had lost consciousness on that night, but never afterwards. I had rid myself for ever of all fear of ghosts. But if the stories I had heard were true, what did they mean? Indra believed in ghosts, but even he had not seen any. However much I entrenched myself behind my scepticism I could not deny that, at times, particular places at particular hours had given me sensations that could only be described as eerie. As I looked at the impenetrable darkness of the night, I was suddenly reminded of another moonless night. That also had been a Saturday.

Five or six years earlier, when our neighbour, Niru Didi, a young widow, lay on her death-bed, there was no one to attend to her except myself. She lived alone in a mud hut inside a grove. She was a selfless creature quick to help others in any kind of trouble, she had taught many of the village girls to read and write and instructed them in needlework and other domestic arts. Everyone loved her for the quiet sweetness of her nature and the purity of her character. But when one day she slipped accidentally and became at the age of thirty a helpless cripple confined to her bed, none of her neighbours came forward to do anything for her in her distress. The immaculate Hindu society slammed its doors in her face. Niru Didi, after six months of patient suffering neglected by the very neighbours whom she had served so selflessly in the past, at last paid the penalty for her sins and passed away in the middle of a dark, rainy night, without the slightest medical aid to alleviate her pain.

No one but an old maidservant and I knew that my aunt helped Niru Didi in secret. She called me to her one day at noon and said, "Srikanta, my boy, it is not unusual for you, I know, to attend on sick people. I should like you to go and see that poor girl now and then." After that, I visited her from time to time and supplied her with a few necessaries which I purchased with the money my aunt gave me for the purpose. I was the only person who was with her at the time of her death. I have never seen in anybody else at the hour of death

such a strange combination of hallucination and reality as I saw in her I will tell the story to show that though one may not believe in anything uncanny or supernatural one cannot help instinctive reactions of fear

It was a stormy night after midnight the howling tempest seemed ready to uproot the foundations of the earth in its fury. All the doors and windows had been shut, I reclined on a rickety armchair not far from Niru Didi's bed She called me to her in her naturally low voice and, drawing my hand close to her mouth, whispered, "Srikanta, go home

"What, Niru Didi, in this storm and rain?"

"Yes, your life is before everything else"

Thinking that her mind was wandering, I said, "I'll go only let the rain abate a little"

She became terribly anxious and cried, "No, no, Srikanta, you must go at once Don't delay any more You must go You must flee"

Something in her voice startled me "Why do you want me to go?" I asked

In reply she drew my hand closer and, looking at the closed window opposite, cried aloud, "Won't you go? Are you bent on losing your life then? Don't you see those black figures who have come to take me away and are threatening me because you are here?"

Then she began to scream "There! under my bed! They're going to kill me! They're taking me away! They're seizing me!" Her screams were incessant and stopped only towards the end of the night, when she had very little life left in her

That terrible and pathetic night is still grave in my memory There is no doubt that I experienced inexpressible fear, and that I thought I saw nameless things and shapes.

It is true the experience seems absurd in recollection But on that night I would have made a wild dash into the tempestous night outside, had I not been deterred by the fear that outside the door I

should run into battalions of the black men that Niru Didi saw. I knew that such things could not be, that they were creations of her delirious brain, and yet—

"Sir!"

It was Ratan who was addressing me.

"What is the matter?"

"The Baiji sends you her *salaams*, sir."

I was not merely astonished, I was annoyed. Not only did I think this sudden call from her damaging to my self-respect, when I remembered what our attitude towards one another had been during those three or four days, it also struck me as being unwarranted presumption on her part. But I managed to repress all signs of agitation before the servant, as I replied, "I have no time to-night, Ratan, I am going to start at once. Tell her I shall see her tomorrow."

Ratan was a well-trained servant, expert in all the arts of diplomacy and etiquette. In a respectfully low voice he said, "The necessity is very urgent, sir, I beg of you to come for a minute. If you don't, sir, she has said that she will come here in person." Heavens! here in this tent, at this hour of the night, with so many people about! "Explain to her, Ratan," I said, "that I will see her early to-morrow morning. Under no circumstances can I go to her tent to-night."

"Then," said Ratan, "she will come herself, sir. I have known her these five years, sir, she is as good as her word. If you don't go, sir, certainly she will come here."

This unreasoning obstinacy exasperated me.

Inside the tent, every one was fast asleep, probably in consequence of the lively bouts. In the servants' tent only two or three were awake. I hurriedly pulled on my boots and coat, then taking my rifle which I had kept ready, I followed Ratan to the *baiji's* tent. Pyari stood waiting for me. She looked me over from head to foot several times, and then said bluntly and angrily, "You can't go to the cremation-grounds to-night. You must not go there on any account."

Surprised, I asked, "Why not?"

"Why not, indeed! Do you really think that there are no ghosts, that you venture to go on a night like this? Do you think that if you do, you will come back alive?" She suddenly burst into tears. I stood bewildered, unable to think of anything to say. Who would not be embarrassed at being summoned by a strange woman at the dead of night to witness her weeping to save his life? Not getting any reply from me, Pyari wiped her tears and said, "Will you never know what it is to be reasonable? Will you always remain as obstinate as ever? Let me see how you can go. I'll go with you if you do." And she picked up a shawl with the evident intention of throwing it round her shoulders. I merely said, "All right, come along." She winced at the hidden taunt in my words. "Yes," she retorted, "a fine reputation you would earn that way! 'He came to hunt, and went out with a *bayi* at midnight looking for ghosts!' Have you banished for ever all sense of shame and self-respect? She stopped, and then, struggling with some repressed emotion, said in a low voice, "In the old days you were never so lost to all sense of propriety. No one would then have thought you could fall so low." Her last words, which on any other occasion might have provoked my anger or annoyance, had now a totally different effect on me. Suddenly I seemed to recognise Pyari. "And how much value," I replied, "do *you* attach to the opinion of others? Who would have thought either, that *you* could fall so low?"

For a fleeting instant I saw the flash of a tearful smile on her face, like wan autumn moonlight. But the next moment she asked in an anxious voice, "What do you know about me? Can you say who I am?"

"You are Pyari."

"Then a lot you know, indeed!"

"Would you be glad if I were to tell you what others don't know but I do? If so, you would have hastened to tell me about it yourself. As you have chosen not to say anything about yourself, you won't get anything out of me either. You can think over the question, whether it is worth your while to reveal your identity. But I have no time to stay now. I am going."

Pyari barred the way. "And if I don't let you go, will you use force with me?"

"But why shouldn't you let me go?"

"Why should I?" she asked "As if ghosts really don't exist and I can let you go simply because you want to I swear that I will scream and shout and waken everybody here if you try to go" She tried to wrest my gun from my hands For some time past my annoyance had been giving place to a feeling of amusement Now I laughed aloud and said, "I can't say whether ghosts really exist or not, but I *can* say there certainly are sham ghosts They speak to you, weep, and stand in your path—and, when the occasion arises, they wring the necks of their victims and drink their blood"

Pyari grew pale and seemed to be much too taken aback to be able to speak At last she said, "So you have recognised me, I see But that is a mistake of yours Those sham ghosts are capable of doing a lot of things, it is true but they don't obstruct your path for the pleasure of wringing your neck Even they have a sense of what is due to those who have any claim on them"

"Well," I said laughing, "you are speaking of yourself Are you a ghost?"

"Of course I am," said Pyari "Those that die and yet are not dead, are ghosts, to be sure Didn't you mean the same thing?" She paused for an instant, and then continued, "In one sense it is true that I am dead But whether that is false or true, it was not I who spread the report of my death My mother got her brother to circulate the rumour Will you hear the whole story?"

At the mention of her "death", all my doubt vanished I recognised without a shadow of doubt that she was Rajlakshmi Many years ago she had gone on a pilgrimage with her mother and had never come back Her mother, on return had announced that she had died of cholera at Benares Though at first I had not been able to think of where I had seen her before, I had from the beginning noticed her vaguely familiar trick of biting her under-lip when she was angry or annoyed So far my memory had failed to identify it, but now with a start of surprise I realised that Rajlakshmi had become Pyari.

Years before, in the days when I was the senior pupil in Manasa Pandit's school in our village, her father, a famous *kulin*,* married again and turned her mother out of his house The mother with her two daughters, Suralakshmi and Rajlakshmi, returned to her parents Rajlakshmi was then eight or nine years of age, Suralakshmi was twelve or thirteen Rajlakshmi was fair of complexion, but malaria and enlarged spleen had given her a protuberant waistline, emaciated hands and legs and scanty, copper-coloured hair She was so afraid of a beating from me that every day she would go into the thickets of *bainchi* trees and make a garland of their ripe fruits for me If on any day it fell short of the proper length I would ask her to repeat her old lessons and slap her to my heart's content Rajlakshmi's only remonstrance at such times was to sit in silence biting her under-lip She never told me how difficult it was for her to gather the ripe *bainchi* fruits I had always thought that her only reason for doing it was her fear of a beating, but now, for the first time, I wondered if there might have been another reason Let that pass Then she was married It was a strange affair Her uncle passed many sleepless nights because he could not secure suitable bridegrooms for his nieces One day he learnt by accident that Birinchi Datta's cook, whom he had brought with him on his transfer from Bankura, was the son of a "low" *kulin* Brahmin At once Rajlakshmi's uncle besought Mr Datta to save him from losing his high Brahmin caste All knew that the cook was a quiet fellow, simple and docile, but on this occasion he showed himself the equal of anyone in wordly wisdom. At the mention of fifty-one rupees as the dowry, he shook his head vehemently and said, "My dear sir, you can't do it so cheap. You can't get a decent pair of rams for fifty-one rupees, and yet you expect to find a bridegroom for that amount ! Give me a hundred and one rupees, and I will marry both the girls without demur, that will relieve you at one stroke of your worries concerning them both When you come to think

* The highest class of Bengali Brahmin

of it, a hundred rupees is no more than the price of two bullocks, surely you don't consider that an extravagant demand?" No, his demand was certainly not excessive After much haggling and argument, the parties compromised on seventy rupees, and both the girls were married on the same night Two days later the bridegroom took seventy rupees in cash from their uncle, and, deserting his brides, left for Bankura He was never heard of again A year and a half later Suralakshmi died of fever, and eighteen months after that Rajlakshmi's death at Benares was reported This, briefly was the history of Pyari, the *baiji*

"Shall I tell you," she asked, "what your thoughts are?"

"Try," I said

"You are thinking, 'How I made her suffer in her childhood! I sent her every day to the thorny *bainchi* thickets and beat her into the bargain for her pains She used to weep quietly, and never at any time did she ask anything of me Now that she makes a request, let me not go to the cremation-grounds to-night' Tell me, aren't those your thoughts?"

I burst out laughing

"You see!" she cried, laughing triumphantly "How could one forget the playmate of one's boyhood? How could one refuse to grant her request? Who indeed could be so heartless? Come, let us sit down, I've got such a lot to tell you Ratan, come and remove this gentleman's boots But why are you laughing?"

"I am laughing to see how you women use your arts to make slaves of us men"

Pyari also laughed "Indeed," she said, "I may be able to use my art on others, but how could I make a slave of him who has enslaved me ever since I could think? You see, it is only now that I am speaking so freely to you But how little I used to speak to you when I used to make garlands of ripe *bainchi*, even though the thorns scratched and tore my hands! I suppose you think that that was out of fear of your beating Don't yon deceive yourself Rajlakshmi was never such a timid girl. But fie on you! You had forgotten me so utterly that

you could not recognise me when you saw me!" And in the wild toss of her head that accompanied her laughter I could see the diamonds in her ear-ring swinging as if in uncontrollable mirth

"But when have I ever treated your memory as sacred," I asked, "that I should never forget you? On the contrary, I am surprised that I was able to recognise you Well, it is getting on for midnight Good-night!"

Pyari's smiling face paled again She paused for a moment and then said, "If you don't believe in spirits, you must believe in snakes and reptiles, tigers, bears, and wild boars in such an out-of-the-way place as this "

"Oh yes, I certainly do," I answered, "and I always take precautions against them "

When she saw that I was going, she said, "I know what kind o, a man you are, and I had my fears that I should not be able to dissuade you Yet I thought I might succeed in keeping you back by my tears and entreaties But I see that the end of all this has been my tears and entreaties alone." Not getting any reply from me, she continued, "Well, go then, I shall not make a bad omen by calling you back! If anything happens, your friends, the kumar and his cronies, will hardly be of any use to you, it's I who will have to suffer for it, in this strange country You did not recognise me, you have thought fit to play the hero before me, but I, who am only a woman, shall not be able to say, that I don't know you "

She suppressed a sigh I turned back smiling awkwardly I felt a heaviness in my heart "Why, *baiji*," I said, "even that would be a great gain to me I had thought that I was absolutely friendless in the world now I shall know that there is someone who cares for me, and who won't leave me to the winds if anything happens to me "

"Do you mean," asked Pyari, "that you never realized that before? However much you insult me by calling me '*baiji*,' you know at the bottom of your heart that Rajlakshmi could never fail you if you wanted her help It would have been a good thing, perhaps, if I

could that would have taught you a lesson What a stupid race women are! If they've loved once, they are done for "

"Pyari," I said, "do you know why even the best *sannyasis* don't get alms?"*

"Yes," said Pyari, "I know But your gibe is not pointed enough to wound me My love is my treasure from the hand of God It was mine before I could tell right from wrong It is not the growth of a day "

"Very well, then," I replied, softened, "I hope that something may happen to me to-night, so that we may have a speedy test of your God-given treasure "

"Holy Durga!" she cried in sudden terror, "you should be ashamed to say such things May you return unharmed! I want no 'test ' What have I done to deserve the good fortune of nursing you back to health and strength with my own hands if you should happen to fall ill? If only that could be, I should have at least one action in my life to be proud of!" She turned her face away, but in the dim light of the lantern I could see her tears

"I can only hope that some day your wish may be fulfilled," I said, as I left the tent I little knew in what a terrible way my jesting hope would be realized. I could hear Pyari's tearful voice, "Holy Durga! O Durga!" coming from inside the tent I took the path that led to the cremation-grounds without further delay

All the way my mind was engrossed with thoughts of Pyari I hardly noticed the long, dark path through the mango orchard or the embankment that I had to cross by the side of the river I mused on the strange and mysterious world which we call a woman's mind The thought that the frail little girl of my boyhood days had brought me

*Mendicancy having fallen into disrepute, even the genuine holy man is regarded with distrust. Srikanta alludes to Rajlakshmi's discredited profession

her daily garlands of *bainchi* fruits as tokens of childish love, that she had silently worshipped me then, and that she claimed to have loved me ever since—all this was a surprise to me But what perplexed me was that in her ignoble life, so full of falsehoods and insincerities, she should have been able to keep a corner free for the love which she called her 'treasure from the hand of God ?' How had she kept it alive ? And how could she bear all the artificial poses and false utterances of her daily life ?

"*Bap* !"*

I was startled out of my thoughts Looking up, I saw grey sandy stretch dotted with *kash* through which a narrow stream meandered into the distance The shrubs looked like a company seated on the carpet of sand, waiting silently for the dance of the spirits to commence Overhead, in the moonless sky, were countless stars, also looking down in expectant silence Not a breeze stirred, no sound except the beating of my own heart broke the desolate silence The night-bird that had cried "*Bap*!" had not called again I advanced slowly westward to the cremation-grounds A few days before I had noticed a few silk-cotton trees that stood like grim gate-keepers of the place, presently I espied their outlines As I passed under them I heard a faint stir of life, which became more definite as I advanced It was like the sobbing of a tired child, whose cries have failed to rouse its mother from sleep and who has become exhausted through excessive sobbing It came from one corner of the cremation-grounds I can wager that who does not know this cry, and hears it for the first time in the dead of night will refuse to advance another step, for he cannot guess that the sobbing thing is not a human child but a young vulture Advancing further, I saw a flock of vultures sitting on the branches of the silk-cotton trees, the disconsolate crying must have come from a naughty child among them

* Lit "father," an exclamation of startled horror

It went on crying as before I passed the tree and stood in a corner of the cremation-grounds The statement that one could count a lakh of human skulls there was not so much of an exaggeration as I had thought, for the ground was strewn with human skeletons The skulls with which the ghostly presences were to play were there in plenty, though the players had not yet arrived I could not discover, however, whether there were any unearthly spectators present As it was then the darkest hour of the night I sat down on a small sandhill, hoping that the play would commence without much delay I took up my gun, opened the breach and examined the cartridge, then laying the gun on my knees, sat ready for action Alas, as it happened, it served no useful purpose when the time for action came

As I waited I thought of Pyari's words, "If you really don't believe in ghosts, why bother to make this foolish trip? And if you are not sure whether they exist or not, I won't let you go " She was right What had I come out to see? It was useless to try to conceal my foolishness from my own mind I had not come to see anything, I had come out of sheer bravado—to prove to those that had said, "Bengalis are coward in action," that they were really a race of heroes

For a long time past I had been convinced that death was the end of everything for man, and I now thought that even if he survived death, it would be neither natural nor fitting for him to come back to the place where his body had been subjected to the undignified rites of cremation, in order to kick and roll his own skull about At least such a wish would hardly have inspired *my* ghostly breast after my dissolution. But then, of course, tastes differ, and there might be spirits to whom this type of sport would appeal, if so, my having come so far might not prove fruitless At any rate the elderly gentleman from the village had held out encouraging prospects

A sudden gust of wind blew a volume of dust and sand over me before it had subsided, another gust came, and yet another "What is this?" I thought "There was no trace of any wind a few minutes ago " However much we may argue and reason, the instinctive faith that there is something unknown after death is bred in our very bones

These gusts of wind, therefore, not only blew dust and sand over me, they roused that secret and instinctive faith as well By and by the wind grew stronger. Now few people knew that when the wind blows through a skull, a sound very much like a sigh is produced In a few minutes I began to hear deep sighs from all sides It seemed as if hundreds of souls surrounded me, sighing in helpless despair An uncomfortable feeling took possession of me and twice I shuddered convulsively The young vulture was still sobbing behind me and now it seemed to moan with redoubled force I realized that I was becoming a prey to fear and that, unless I could control myself, death itself might overtake me in those grim surroundings I had never before come to such a terrible place alone He who could come here alone without a tremor of fear was Indra, not I I had accompanied him to many dreadful places, and so had thought that I too could go anywhere with cool head and undaunted heart But now I could plainly see that what I had thought was courage had been mere hot-headed vanity Did I possess his unflinching breast or his unswerving conviction or his irresistible armour of faith in the efficacy of Rama's name ? It was Indra, not I, who could stand alone on this dreadful plain and see the spirits play with human skulls I felt that it would be a relief to see even a live tiger or bear Suddenly I felt a breath on my right ear breathed by somebody behind me it was so cold a breath that it seemed to congeal into frost Without turning I seemed to see plainly that the nostrils through which this breath had issued had no skin or flesh, not even a drop of blood they were a bony cavern In front of me, behind, to the right and to the left of me was impenetrable darkness the still, silent night palpitated with the breath of desolation The moans and sighs of despair seemed to be closing in upon me from all sides And the cold, clammy breath on my ear blew with nerve-racking persistence It was as if all the cold blasts of the spirit-world were blowing on me through that bony cavern near my ear

Throughout all these events I had clung to the idea that it would be fatal to lose consciousness, and that its loss would mean death I found that my right leg was trembling visibly, I tried to keep it still,

but without success, it appeared to be someone else's Just then I heard several voices crying from far away, "Babu-ji! Babu-sa'b!" My hair stood on end Who were these? Again I heard a cry, "Please do not shoot!" This time the voices were nearer, and, without moving my head, I could see out of the corner of my eye a faint streak of light One of the voices seemed to be that of Ratan, and a little later I perceived that it was really he Advancing a little further, he stood behind a silk-cotton tree and shouted, "Sir, wherever you may be, please don't shoot! We are Ratan"* One could tell by his grammar that Ratan was really a barber by caste

In my joy I tried to respond by a shout, but no voice came

Ratan and three other men came up to me with big sticks in their hands and two lanterns One of the three was Chhotulal who accompanied Pyari's singing on the *tabla*, another was Pyari's *darwan* The third was the village watchman

"Come with us, sir," said Ratan, "it is nearly three"

"All right," I said, and began to walk back with them

"What splendid courage you have shown, sir!" exclaimed Ratan. "We can't tell you how scared the four of us were coming"

"But what made you come?"

"Greed, sir, love of money," replied Ratan "Each of us has got a month's pay to-night, sir" He came up close to me and added in a lower voice, "When you went away, sir, I went to my mistress and saw she was crying 'Ratan,' she said, 'whatever shall I do? I will give you a month's pay you must all follow him!' I answered, 'I can take Chhotulal and Ganesh with me, madam, but none of us know the way' Just then we heard the watchman's cry, and she said, 'Call him here, Ratan, he is sure to know the way' I went out and called him in He got six rupees and consented to show us the way Did

* 'We are Ratan,' is characteristic of this caste's indifference to grammar

you hear the cry of a baby, sir?" and Ratan shivered visibly and clutched the tail of my coat "Our Ganesh Pande is a Brahmin," he said, "and that's why we have been saved to-night Otherwise—"

I said nothing I was not in a condition to protest or to correct anybody I walked as in a daze in absolute silence

After a few minutes Ratan asked, "Did you see anything, sir?"

"No," I answered.

This curt reply evidently perplexed Ratan He asked, "Are you angry with us, sir, for coming? If you had only seen her weep—"

"No," I said hastily, "no, Ratan, I am not angry in the least"

When we reached, the watchman went away, and Ganesh and Chhotulal went to the servants' tent Ratan said to me, "The mother* has requested you to see her before you go"

I paused I seemed to see Pyari plainly, sitting in the lamplight, anxiously waiting for me, with tears in her eyes My whole being suddenly yearned to meet her

"Come, sir," said Ratan with respectful entreaty I closed my eyes for an instant to steady myself I realized that I was not in a normal frame of mind All my faculties had suddenly become intoxicated as with some exquisite wine Could I, with this madness in my heart, visit her tent at such an hour? No, I could not

"Why are you standing there in the dark, sir?" asked Ratan, perplexed at my indecision "Please come this way"

"No, Ratan," I said hurriedly, "not now I am going"

"But the mother is waiting," urged Ratan, evidently aggrieved, "she is awaiting your return"

"Awaiting me? Tender her a thousand compliments, and tell her I will see her before I go away to-morrow I cannot see her now I feel extremely sleepy, Ratan, I am going" And without giving poor Ratan time for a reply, I hurried off towards my tent

* In Bengal the mistress of the house is generally referred to as 'the mother' —*Trans*

IX

WHEN I SEE MEN PRONOUNCE ON THEIR OWN natures instead of leaving judgment to the Supreme, and say, 'I am thus or thus,' or 'I would never have acted so', I am filled with shame Not about our natures only we are apt to judge others too with immense self-assurance The writings of literary critics provide amusing proof of my assertion One would think that their acquaintance with the characters of a book was more intimate than that of the author himself 'There is no consistency', they declare in decided accents 'in the delineation of this character, and as for the other, he never could have acted thus' And the readers say, 'wonderful! This *is* criticism this is analysis of character What impudence writing such muck when such a masterly critic keeps a vigilant eye? See now how he has pulled that book to pieces!' The book might certainly have its faults what earthly thing has not? All the same such self-assurance in pronouncing judgment fills me with infinite humility, especially when I contemplate my own life For if there is any meaning at all in the phrase 'infinite soul', then the accumulation of experience in countless births could easily upset the training and education acquired in one lifetime, and set at naught the calculations of analytical skill And the heart of man, after all, is the seat of his eternal soul

Take the case of Annada Didi I can never forget her benign face, angelic in its calm After she had left us few nights went by when I did not sob myself to sleep How often I cried, "Didi, I have no more fear for myself I am saved By the alchemy of your touch all that was base in me has been turned to gold Now nothing in me can rust by exposure to the changing weather of circumstance the gold will stay untarnished to the end But you are gone, my Didi, and no one can share in this good fortune of mine, for no one else has seen

you as I have done If others had known you as well as I have done, their natures too, would have been transmuted " My imagination busied itself at that tender age with conceiving a thousand ways in which I could have saved the world by sharing my Didi with it Sometimes I would think that if I could get seven big pots of gold I would place her, like Devi Chaudhurani,* on an enormous throne in a forest clearing, and call people together, and they would be her subjects Sometimes I would think of the great possibilities of putting her into a big house-boat which would be taken from one country to another, with magnificent bands playing to announce her greatness. Thus would build a thousand castles in the air, castles that seem fantastic enough in retrospect, calling forth in these sober days a smile, as well as a tear

I had a conviction in those days as firm and deep-rooted as the Himalayas, that there certainly never existed in this world, and could hardly exist even in the next a woman who could win my heart 'She alone shall share my life, who speaks with *her* soft voice, whose lips possess the cool sweetness of *her* smile, whose brow has the angelic radiance of *her* brow, whose eyes have *her* tender appeal,' said my exacting imagination 'And she shall be as loving and as devoted as my Didi ! Her actions, like my Didi's, shall shine with the splendour of a wonderful soul ! And she shall accept and prize me above and beyond all happiness and misery, all good and evil, and all right and wrong, in this life !'

Was it the same person now whose first waking thought was of *another's* words, in a hidden corner of whose heart's secret recesses cherished the memory of another's tears, whose fancy dwelt on another face, as different from Didi's as night is from day? Only six days before, if some genie had come and warned me of such a contingency, I should have laughed in his face and said, 'Thanks, Mr Know-all, for your

* Devi Chaudhurani . the heroine of Bankimchandra Chatterji's novel of the same name.

solicitude! You need not trouble yourself about my happiness My heart knows what true gold is, and I will never be taken in by brass, however glittering '

And yet brass did come in a flood of glory There in the innermost chamber of my heart where my Annada Didi's blessings had been a shower of purest gold, some unforeseen influence made me yearn towards this brass

I plainly see that those of my critics who cannot brook any weakness are getting impatient they will say, 'What is it that you wish to say in such tortuous language, after all ? Why not come out with it at once ? Just that on waking that morning you found your mind irresistibly calling up the image of Pyari's face, that you discovered a longing for the very person whom you had contemptuously sought to brush aside—isn't that all ? Why bring Annada Didi into it at all ? We can see through all this window-dressing we understand human nature The image of your ideal was obviously not very firmly implanted in your mind, for if it had been, this base counterfeit would not have obtained a foothold there '

I dare say I do not argue I have learned that man never completely understands himself He believes himself to be something other than he really is and creates difficulties by seeking to act on such belief, the penalties that he invites by such self-deception are by no means light I know under the influence of what ideal I have been 'preaching' about womanhood So when, on reading this history, people declare that Srikanta is a humbug and a hypocrite, I must perforce hold my tongue I have never consciously practised hypocrisy My only fault has been that I was unaware of the weakness that lay hidden in my character When I found that my wayward heart was anxious to welcome a wild impulse into its inmost recess, the shock of surprise brought tears to my eyes, yet I could not deny it entrance On the one hand I felt weighed down with a feeling of shame, on the other my whole being was flooded with a glad ecstasy which my heart would not forego, whatever the consequence

"Babu Saheb!" The kumar's servant was calling me I sat up in bed, and he respectfully informed me that the kumar and his retinue

were eagerly waiting to hear of my adventures of the previous night I asked him how they had learned of my adventure "The *darwan* of his highness's tent," he answered, "told them, sir, that you came back just before dawn "

As soon as I entered the kumar's tent a great commotion arose A thousand eager questions were levelled at me The elderly gentleman of the previous night was among those present, and Pyari with her attendants was sitting in silence at one side We did not exchange glances this morning as before · she appeared oblivious of my presence

"All honour to your courage, Srikanta," said the kumar, when the hubbub had subsided "When did you reach the cremation-grounds last night ?"

"Between midnight and one o'clock, Your Highness "

"It must have been totally dark then," said the elderly gentleman "The *amavasya** began after half-past eleven "

Sounds of startled surprise arose When they had abated, the kumar asked, "And then ? What did you see ?"

"Countless bones and skulls "

"What astounding courage is yours, Srikanta !" said the kumar. "Did you enter the cremation-grounds or did you stand outside ?"

"I entered it and sat on a mound of sand," I answered

"Well, well, what next ? What next ? What did you see after you sat down ?"

"Vast stretches of sand "

"Anything else ?"

"Clumps of *kashar* shrubs and *simul* trees "

"Anything else ?"

* Dark phase of the moon

"And the river"

"Yes, yes, we know all that!" cried the kumar, bursting with impatience "Well, those things—"

I burst out laughing, and said, "I saw two bats fly over my head"

The elderly gentleman then advanced towards me and asked in Hindustani, "Did you see nothing else, sir?"

"Nothing"

For a moment the whole tentful of people seemed disappointed Then the elderly gentleman cried out angrily, "It's impossible, sir! You can't have gone at all!" I merely smiled at his anger, for it was only natural The kumar pressed my hand with his and besought me in a voice of entreaty, "On your honour, Srikanta, tell us what you really saw"

"On my honour, I say, I saw nothing else"

"How long were you there?"

"About three hours"

"Well, if you didn't see anything, did you hear anything?"

"Yes, I heard something"

In an instant every face brightened and the crowd closed in around me to hear every word I told them how a night-bird had passed overhead crying, "*Bap! Bap!*", how the young vultures on the *simul* trees had kept up a plaintive crying like ailing children, how a sudden gust of wind had risen and I had heard the sighing of the skulls, how at length some mysterious being had breathed ice-cold breaths on my ear After I had finished no one spoke for some time there was silence throughout the tent At length the elderly gentleman heaved a deep sigh, and placing a hand on my shoulder, said with impressive slowness, "Babu-ji, you have been able to return with your life, that is because you are a true Brahmin, nobody else could have done it But take an old man's warning, sir, pray do not take such risks again! I touch the feet of your forefathers a thousand million times, it is their spiritual merit that saved you last night" And in his emotion he put his hand on my feet

I have said previously that this man was an expert story-teller He now began to give an exhibition of his art With eyes that blazed and darkened alternately, awing us with a sense of horror and mystery, he began a hair-raising exposition of my story—of everything that had happened overnight from the weeping of the young vultures to the icy-cold breath on my ear I had not noticed that Pyari had been edging nearer, the sound of a quick sigh made me turn my head, and I saw her sitting close behind me, staring at the speaker Down her flushed cheeks two tears had coursed unnoticed, leaving a trail She was unaware of my swift glance and of the picture that she made, with her eager, tear-stained face lifted towards the speaker, but the picture was stamped on my heart for ever in lines of fire When the narrative ended, she rose and excusing herself with a bow to the kumar left the tent slowly and in silence

I had intended to leave that morning, but as I was not feeling quite well, and had been urged by the kumar to stay on, I decided to go in the afternoon I returned to my tent, pondering over the change in Pyari's bearing Hitherto she had mocked and laughed at me, she had even let me feel the shadow of an impending quarrel clouding her look, but this indifference—was altogether new And yet I was pleased rather than pained, for though it had never been my business to worry about the inner workings of a young woman's mind I could vaguely sense that her attitude indicated affectionate reproach rather than indifference Perhaps it was this intuitive knowledge that had made me omit from my narrative all mention of her having sent men to the cremation-grounds to look for me She had left the tent at the end of my story It was a gesture of unspoken reproach I had not on return told her anything of what had happened What she had had the exclusive right to hear first, she had heard from her remote seat behind all the others, as it were by accident This silent accusation of love tasted so deliciously exquisite to my unaccustomed palate that I withdrew to relish it in solitude, like a child who has found an entrancing piece of confection

I drowsed all afternoon, but the hope that Ratan would come prevented sleep The day lengthened, but Ratan did not come I

had been so sure of his coming, that when at last I rose and saw the afternoon far advanced, I decided he had come and gone back, thinking me asleep The fool! I thought, should he not have called out to waken me? The thought of a wasted afternoon oppressed me, but I felt little doubt that he would come again after dusk, perhaps with a request, or a note, or something which he would slip into my hand But how was I to pass the time until then? Looking ahead I saw in the distance a glistening expanse of water It was a tank or artificial lake about a mile in length, the work of a forgotten *zamindar* One side of it, to the north, had filled up and was overgrown with thick jungle It was too far from the village for the women to fetch water from There was an old *ghat* with a flight of steps leading down to the water I walked towards this and sat down listlessly in a corner of the *ghat*

It was said that the village had originally been situated by the lake, but that, devastated by cholera and the plague, it had finally shifted to its present site On all sides I could see signs of past habitations The rays of the setting sun lingered obliquely on the dark surface of the water making it look like burnished gold while I sat gazing in silence

Slowly the sun went down, and the dark water took on a deeper shade From the adjoining jungle a thirsty jackal came out to the edge of the water and then stole timidly back It was time for me to get up The time I had meant to idle away here had passed by, yet for some mysterious reason I felt I could not leave the place I sat rooted to that flight of steps as if bound by a spell

How many persons, I thought, had passed and re-passed, stepped and re-stepped over the spot where I was sitting! How often they had come down this flight of steps to bathe, to wash their clothes, to take water To what invisible lake did they now resort for these daily wants of theirs? They would come about this time of the evening, and sit on these steps, many a song and story would soothe and enliven their weariness after the day's labour And then, when on a sudden came death in the guise of the great plague, snatching away whole families many had come here, perhaps, with thirsting lips and hurrying feet, to breathe their last on these very steps Perhaps their thirsty spirits

still hovered about For, who could say with assurance that things we do not see, do not exist? "Babu-ji," the old man had said that very morning, "never believe that nothing is left of us after death, or that the souls of the dead do not wander about helplessly in space, goaded on by desires and appetites, pleasure and pain, like ourselves" He had told us stories of King Vikramaditya, and the *Vaitals** and of the magical powers of the *sadhus* and *sannyasis* who practise *tantric* rites "Never think, Babu-ji," he had concluded, "that they do not make themselves seen and heard when suitable occasion arises I solemnly advise you never to go again to those cremation-grounds And never disbelieve, I pray you, that those who take pains to acquire powers in the unseen world have their reward and recompense some day"

Those words, which in daylight had been but a matter for jest and laughter, came back to me in the gathering darkness with another aspect The only reality of existence, I thought, was death The manifold forms of good and evil, pleasure and pain, were they not like the different materials used for a pyrotechnical display? They were collected and disposed with care and skill only to provide a flare and then turn to ashes! If then one really could learn what lay on the other side of death, what, indeed, could be more profitable? It mattered little who gave as the knowledge and in what form it came.

Footsteps broke upon my thoughts I turned but saw nothing except darkness There was no one in sight Shaking off my lethargy, I stood up and set out, as I thought, in the direction of our encampment I laughed as I remembered the incidents of the previous night and said to myself, 'No, no more sitting in the dark Last night I felt a breath on my right ear, and now if the owner of the breath comes

* The legend of King Vikram and his magical throne supported by twentyfive or thirty-two *Vaitals* or genie, is an Indian classic; the original story from the Sanskrit has, like other classics, acquired many accretions —*Trans*

with designs on my left—well, I shall hardly be in a condition to relish the joke!—'

I had no idea how long I had been sitting by the lake, or what hour of the night it was perhaps it was midnight But what was this? I walked and walked, and yet the narrow footpath led on interminably I could not see a single light from our tents For some time I had noticed a clump of bamboo in front of me, obstructing my view "Why," I thought suddenly, "I did not notice that when I came out Have I lost my way?" Advancing a little further, I saw that it was not a clump of bamboo after all, but a few tamarind trees whose wide-spread branches, closely intertwined, deepened the gloom through which my path pursued its zigzag course Under those trees it was so dark that I could not see my own hand My heart began to beat fast "Where am I going?" I asked myself Summoning up courage, I passed under the giant tamarind tree Imagine my surprise when I saw nothing but a dark expanse of sky confronting me But what was that high ridge up there? Could it be the river embankment? Yes, so it was My feet were weighted down with an overpowering weariness but I dragged myself to the top of the embankment It was just I had thought,—below me stretched the vast cremation-grounds Again I heard foot-steps this time they passed before me and lost themselves in the grey desolation below Half-bereft of my senses, reeling and stumbling, I dropped down on the sand and gravel of the embankment I had no doubt left in my mind that someone had been trying to show me the way through these cremation-grounds to others beyond, and that my invisible guide whose footsteps had lured me from the lake had just left me, for I seemed to hear the echo of his footfall still vibrating in the air

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X

I HAVE PASSED THE AGE AT WHICH ONE IS anxious to account for every event I am therefore not ashamed to admit that I do not possess sufficient knowledge to explain how, on that dark night, I strayed from the ruined tank to the borders of the cremation-grounds, or whose footsteps they were that lured me thus out of my proper path Even to-day these incidents are wrapped in mystery But my admission must not be regarded as the admission of a belief in the existence of spirits I remember a lunatic who lived in our village; by day he used to beg from door to door for food, at night he would take a small ladder, cover it with a part of his *dhoti*, and holding it aloft wander about in way-side gardens in the shadow of the trees. He frightened countless people out of their senses by this foolish masquerading He could have no motive of gain, and yet his mind was never so active as in devising a hundred new means of frightening innocent people. He would tie dry faggots to a branch of a tree and set fire to them; he would smear his face over with soot, and, climbing up to the roof of a temple, sit there in that state for hours, late at night he would creep close to the houses of poor peasants and call out their names in an unearthly voice And yet he was never caught at these tricks From his conduct during the day it was impossible for anyone to suspect him of the grim jests which he perpetrated at night, not only in our village but in a number of neighbouring villages also He confessed his diabolical humour before his death , and all those terror-inspiring manifestations of the occult ceased with his life Perhaps, in my own case also, some such explanation was possible

When I sank half-unconscious on the dusty embankment, the sound of footsteps advanced into the centre of the cremation-grounds and then faded in the empty air The echoes seemed to jeer at me,

'Was it for this that we brought you so far? Come on into the midst of us! Do not sit there like an outcast, come and sit with us as one of ourselves' I cannot be sure whether I really heard those words with my ears or felt them in my inner consciousness, but I was still in full control of my faculties I have found that if you cling desperately to consciousness you cannot lose it altogether, a part of it remains in any case My eyes kept gazing ahead, with a fixed, half-wakeful stare I was as far from the calm of unconsciousness as from the alertness of a mind that is fully awake

I had not forgotten that it was very late and that I had to return to the tent I would have made an effort to do so, too, but for the feeling of complete futility that came over me I had not come there of my own free will, I had never dreamt of coming there again Whoever had brought me there had some special need of me and would not let me return without accomplishing his object I had heard that no one, once he was in 'their' power could escape against 'their' will, that, however cunningly one might seek to run away from 'them,' his path would turn into a maze leading him invariably back to the original starting-point

I therefore felt that all restless attempts to break through were quite useless, and sat still without making any effort or movement Then suddenly I saw something which I shall never forget

For the first time in my life I realised that night has a form and features of its own, apart from the forms and features of trees and hills, earth and water, field and jungle I saw night, deep, dark, colossal, seated on the widespread world, under the limitless, black sky of midnight, with eyes closed as in mystic meditation, while the whole universe, with closed lips and bated breath, preserved an inviolate calm Suddenly my eyes saw a flash of palpitating beauty What liar, I thought, declared that light alone had beauty and darkness none? When had I ever seen such an inundation of beauty as the darkness that flooded the earth and the heavens, that flowed about, above, below, and within me in an all-enveloping infinitude, as far as the eye could reach, and beyond? The deeper, the vaster, the more uncomprehensible a thing was, the darker it was The limitless ocean was dark, and dark

were the interiors of forests, impenetrable and full of ancient mysteries And was not He who was the support of the universe, the source of all light and movement, the Life of all life, and the Soul of beauty, was not He too a dark mystery to all men ? Was it because He was devoid of beauty, or was merely that darkness had become a synonym for what passed comprehension, anything unknown and impenetrable ? That was, perhaps, why death appeared to us as dark and the other world as shrouded in limitless obscurity That too, perhaps explained why the ineffable Beloved of Radha; who flooded the world with the radiance of his love, was dark of aspect !

I had never before thought of such things and had never experienced such emotions But strangely enough, my helpless loneliness in that awe-inspiring place brought me no feeling of terror but an overpowering ecstasy in the mystic beauty of the dark universe I felt that I had never before seen so much beauty in the formless gloom that filled all space Perhaps, then, Death too was not horrid or ugly because of his darkness When he came one day, perhaps I should discover him as beautiful and as profound as the night 'And if,' I mused, 'to-night is the destined moment of our meeting face to face, then, O dark immensity ! O beckoning footsteps ! O infinite beauty dissolving all sorrow and fear and pain by magic touch ! fill all my body and soul with primeval nescience ! And when I have greeted Death with a heart purged of all fear at this gateway of his temple, so dark, so austere, and so solemn, let me follow him with triumphal gladness to the end ' And then I thought suddenly, 'Why did I not obey the silent call of my guide ? Why am I sitting here like a wretched outcast ? Why should I not go on ?'

I went down and sat in the very centre of the vast cremation-grounds I cannot say now how long I was there, but I sat as in a trance When I came back to my normal self I found that the darkness had thinned out, and that the morning star floated in a sky faintly suffused with a pale light I heard faint sounds as of subdued conversation Looking in their direction I saw what seemed to be a small party of people coming towards me along the embankment They were still at some distance and were half-concealed by a large silk-cotton

tree They were carrying two or three lanterns which swung to and fro with their movements Climbing the embankment I saw that the party consisted of two covered bullock-carts and five or six men on foot, going evidently towards the railway-station

I felt that I ought to keep out of their sight, for, however intelligent they might be, if they saw me standing alone there at that hour like a veritable ghost, they would at least make a terrible uproar, if nothing more

I came back and stood in my original place A few minutes later the little company passed by along the embankment just above me I thought at first that I had been detected, for one of the foremost men stood looking towards me for several seconds and then spoke to someone in the first bullock-cart, but they proceeded almost immediately and were soon lost to sight behind a bushy tree Feeling that the night was almost over, I was making up my mind to return when a loud voice came from behind the tree "Srikanta Babu !"

"Hallo," I cried "Is that Ratan ?"

"Yes, sir Please come this way, sir"

Quickly mounting the embankment, I asked, "Ratan, are you going home ?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, "we're going home the mother is in the first cart"

As I approached the cart, Pyari looked out through the curtains and said, "I knew it must be you as soon as the *durwan* described what he saw Come up into the cart, I have something to tell you"

"What is it ?" I asked, going nearer

"Get in, please, and I will tell you," said Pyari

"No, I can't, there is no time I must reach my tent before daybreak"

Pyari put her head out and suddenly catching hold of my right hand said in a voice of earnest entreaty, "Don't make a scene before the servants, I implore you Won't you climb in ?"

Somewhat taken aback by her unusual excitement, I climbed into the cart and sat down. Telling the driver to proceed, she asked, "Why did you come here again to-night?"

With perfect sincerity I answered, "I do not know"

Pyari was still holding my hand. "You don't know?" she said "Very well But why did you come without telling anyone?"

"It is true," I said, "that nobody knows of my coming here, but I did not conceal it intentionally from anyone"

"I don't believe it"

"It's the truth."

"What do you mean, then?"

"Will you believe me if I tell you what I mean? I did not conceal anything from anyone, nor did I wish to come here again"

"Then," said Pyari derisively, "perhaps you will say that you were spirited away through the thin air and found yourself here?"

"No," I answered, "no one spirited me away through the air I came here on foot But I can't say why I came and when"

Pyari was silent

"I don't know, Rajlakshmi," I said, "whether you will believe me, but the real story is somewhat strange," and I related to her all that had happened to me While she was listening I felt, more than once, a tremor run through the hand that lay in mine, but she said not a word The curtain was raised, and, looking out, I saw that the sky had grown clear "I must go now," I said

"No," said Pyari in a hollow faraway voice

"What do you mean, Pyari? Do you know what my going away like this will mean?"

"I know, I know but these people are not your guardians, that they can force you to lose your life to save your reputation" She dropped my hand and, seizing my feet, cried out in an agonised tone, "Kanta-da, you won't live if you go back to that place I don't want you to go with me, but I can't let you go back there either. I will

buy you your railway ticket. Go home or anywhere else you like, but don't think of staying there a minute longer"

"But what about my things?" I asked

"They will send them back to you, if they like. If they don't they're not so very valuable, after all, are they?"

"That's true," I admitted, "they're not of any great value But the false rumours that will arise, what of them?"

Pyari let go of my feet and sat silent Just then the cart turned a corner and I could see the eastern sky that had been behind us It bore a striking resemblance to the face of this unhappy woman In both I saw the suggestion of a mass of hidden flame struggling through the darkness

"Why are you silent?" I asked

Pyari smiled a sad smile, and said, "Kanta-da, it is difficult to write out a deed of gift with the pen which one has used all one's life to make forgeries So you want to go? Very well then, go But promise me you'll leave that place before noon to-day"

"I promise"

"Promise that no entreaty of anybody's will keep you there to-night"

"No, it won't"

Pyari took off her ring and, placing it near my feet, touched the ground with her forehead, then, taking the dust of my feet, she put it on her head and dropped the ring into my pocket "Go then," she said "your journey will be longer by about three miles"

I got down from the cart It was now broad daylight "One more thing," Pyari said imploringly "When you reach home write to me"

I promised to write, and left her Not once did I turn back my head to see whether they were still standing or had started forward But for a long time I could feel her tear-dimmed gaze throwing itself, again and again, helplessly on my back.

It was eight o'clock when I reached camp As I passed Pyari's vacant tent and observed discarded odds and ends littered about it, a futile feeling of desolation rose in my heart. I turned my face away and entered my tent

One of the servants came up and said, "You have been out very early, sir, for your walk "

Not caring to reply I flung myself on my bed and closed my eyes.

XI

THE SADHU

I WROTE A LETTER TO PYARI JUST TO TELL HER that I had kept my promise I got her reply in a few days One thing I had noticed all along not only had Pyari never urged me to come to her house at Patna, she had never even suggested it Not even in her letter was there a hint of any such invitation

There was however, at the end, a request that I have not yet forgotten It was a request that I might remember her in my days of trouble, if not in those of happiness

Days passed and Pyari's memory grew dim and almost faded away But I observed that since my return from the *shikar* my mind was often distracted and ill at ease, a sense of bereavement pervaded every limb of my body like a lingering *malaise*

At last there came a night when I lay tired and listless on my bed It was the night of the *Holi* festival I had just come home from it worn out and exhausted, and had not yet washed the red powder out of my hair A window by my side was open, and I lay looking through the branches of a *pipal* tree at the moonlight that flooded the heavens That is all that I remember of that night I do not remember why I went straight to the station, bought a ticket for Patna, and got into the train The night passed, and when on the next day I woke up to the fact that we had arrived at Barh, quite close to Patna, I left the train at once Putting my hand into my pocket I found that there was not the least cause for anxiety, for I had a two-anna bit and two coppers Pleased with the discovery, I sallied forth in search of a shop where I could get something to eat I found one and soon spent half my capital in making an excellent meal of parched rice, curds, and sugar.

Then I set out on a walk through the village Within an hour I was hungry again in spite of my sumptuous repast I had just vowed that no decent man could live in such an impossible place, when I noticed smoke issuing from a mango grove not far from me 'Where there is smoke, there is fire,' I reasoned, 'and where there is fire, there is a pot set to boil,' and I made for the grove

I was in luck! It was a real *sannyasi's ashram* Water for tea was set on the fire in a big metal pot The *Baba* was sitting before it with half-closed eyes, around him lay the paraphernalia of *ganja*-smoking A young *sannyasi* was milking a goat, the milk would be useful for the tea A pair of camels, a couple of ponies, and a cow with her calf had been tethered to the branches of a tree Close by was a small tent Peeping inside, I saw an acolyte of about my own age grinding *bhang* in a stone mortar which he held between his feet The holy scene opened the flood-gates of my devotion, and in the twinkling of an eye I lay prostrate at the feet of the *Baba* Taking the dust of his feet on my hand, I thought, 'How infinite is Thy mercy, O God! To what a place hast Thou brought me! Let Pyari go to predition! If I ever leave this spot which is the very gate-way to salvation, may I never find a resting place even in everlasting hell!'

"Son," asked the *sadhu*, "what has brought thee here?"

"I have left my home," I said meekly, "a child in ignorance, a wretch that seeks the path to salvation Grant me the privilege of waiting on your august feet"

The *sadhu* smiled, and nodded two or three times, then he said briefly in Hindi, "Son, go back home the Path is most difficult"

"*Baba,*" I replied in a voice of supplication, "in the Mahabharata it is written that the great sinner, Jagai and Madhai*, attained to heaven

* Two bad characters reformed by Chaitanya, the 17th century reformer–saint of Bengal The story has nothing to do with the *Mahabharata*, that the *Sadhu* swallowed it shows the extent of his learning —*Trans.*

by clinging to the feet of Vasistha, the mighty ascetic, and should I not also get salvation through the virtue of your lotus feet? A voice within me says I must"

The *sadhu* was evidently pleased, and said, "What thou sayest is true Very well, my son, if such be the will of Rama so be it" The acolyte who had been milking the goat now prepared tea and offered it to the *Baba* After he had blessed the tea by partaking of it, we took the remnants

The *bhang* was still in course of preparation for the evening As it was yet daylight, the *Baba* bethought himself of another path to beatitude, and directed a disciple's attention to the *ganja*-pipe, giving special instructions so that there might be no unnecessary delay

Half an hour passed The omniscient *Baba* was highly pleased with me and said, "Yes, my son, I find many virtuous qualities in thy nature Thou art fit to be my disciple"

In a sudden access of joy I conveyed the dust of his feet to my forehead a second time

Next day, on my coming back to the *ashram* from my bath, I found that, through the grace of my *guru*, I lacked nothing The chief disciple brought out a brand new suit of *gerua** clothes, about a dozen rosaries, strings of *rudraksha*† beads, large and small, and a pair of brass armlets After donning the spiritual garb, I took some ashes from the *dhuni*, the sacred fire which burnt night and day in our camp, and smeared my face and head with them

"*Babaji*," I asked this head disciple with a wink, "is there a looking glass? I am consumed with a longing to see what I look like now" The *Babaji* was not dead to all sense of humour With an air of profound gravity he replied, "There is one"

* *i e*, dyed with red ochre

† A kind of dried berry.

"Then bring it to me"

I took the mirror and went behind a tree It was a small mirror with a tin frame, the sort up-country barbers give their customers to hold while they shave them I could scarcely restrain my laughter when I saw my transformed appearance Who would ever imagine that I was the Srikanta who only a few days before had sat listening to the songs of the *baiji* in the company of a real prince and his satellites!

An hour later I was taken before the *guru* for my initiation He expressed himself highly pleased with my make-up, and said, "Son, wait for a month or so"

"So be it," I said to myself and, taking the dust of his feet, sat down beside him with folded hands, in an attitude of devotion

In the course of the evening dissertation he gave me many profound and precious words of advice in spiritual matters He dwelt in turn on the difficulty of just appreciation, the austerities that lead to realisation, the manifold abuses of latter-day charlatans, the essentials of concentration on the lotus-feet of God, the wonderful assistance rendered by inhaling the smoke of a certain dried plant All these things he explained to me, and he also encouraged me by hinting that in the perfect performance of the last-named rite I showed myself an apt and promising pupil Thus, after learning many a secret of the path to salvation, I became permanently attached to the *Guru Maharaj's* train as third disciple

In order to wean us from the ways of the world and to help us in our spiritual exercises, our *guru* made rigorous arrangements Tea, bread, *ghee*, milk, curds, parched rice, sugar, and other similarly austere dishes were presented for our diet Besides this, we kept ceaseless vigil lest our minds wander from the contemplation of the lotus-feet of God In consequence, I began to develop a sleek and dignified rotundity quite in contrast with the leanness of my sinful past

One task we had, to go out begging Though not the prime duty of *sannyasis*, it is always a very important duty, because it has an intimate connection with the spiritual dietary The *Maharaj* never did it himself; we, his disciples, did it for him by turns In all the other

duties of *sannyasis* I quickly outdistanced the other disciples, in this alone I failed to shine I never succeeded in making it natural or pleasant But there was one consolation I was in Bihar and not in Bengal I am not comparing the merits of the two, all I want to say is that here the women never advised me, as they would have done in Bengal, to seek the next house on the ground that their hands were dirty or that they were otherwise engaged, nor did the men demand the reason why, being an able-bodied man, I went about begging Everyone, whether rich or poor, gave us alms, and none turned us away Thus passed some fifteen days in the shade of the mango-tree There was little to worry about during the day, but at night mosquito-bites greatly weakened my desire for salvation, indeed sometimes made it disappear altogether I realized that it would be impossible for me to persist in the course I had chosen unless my skin could be thickened However superior a Bengali may be in other respects, one must admit that the up-country skin is better suited to the attainment of salvation than the Bengali's One day, after returning from my bath, I was proceeding towards my spiritual breakfast, when the *Guru Maharaj* sang out

"Saint Bharadwaj at Prayag hath his seat
Most dear to him are Rama's sacred feet"

In other words, "Strike camp we are going to Prayag" But it was no easy matter striking a *sannyasi's* camp The whole morning was spent chasing the pony which had strayed in search of food, loading him with a part of our belongings, fixing the *Maharaj's* saddle on the camel, collecting our cattle and goats, tying up our bundles and arranging for their transport After all this we started, and, after a journey of four miles, reached a huge banyan tree at one end of a village named Bithaura As evening was coming on, we decided to camp under the tree It was a beautiful place, and our *Maharaj* expressed approval It was good to know that he was pleased, but I could not imagine how many births it would take us to reach the seat of Bharadwaj *Muni* at this rate of progress

An incident that occurred here is perhaps responsible for my remembering the name of the village to this day It was the day of the full moon All three of us, by the *guru's* order, had gone out to beg,

each in a different direction If I had been the only one out begging I should probably have made greater efforts than I did, but as our meal was not dependent on my unaided efforts I merely did a great deal of aimless wandering Suddenly I caught a glimpse, through the open door of a house, of the figure of a Bengali girl Though the cloth she was wearing was evidently from a country loom and very coarse in texture, the way she had draped it excited my special interest We had been five or six days in the village and I had been to most of the houses, but as yet I had seen no Bengali, male or female *Sannyasis* have the right of free entry everywhere As soon as I entered the house, the girl began to look intently at me I can remember her face even to-day, for I do not remember to have seen such a tragic look of despair on the face of any other girl of ten or eleven Hopeless grief and despair were expressed in her dark eyes and in every line of her little figure I asked in Bengali, "Won't you give me some alms, little mother ?" She said nothing at first then her lips trembled and twitched several times, and she burst into tears

I felt a little abashed Though there was no one near us, I could hear voices of Bihari women from the adjoining room. If one of them should come out, what would she think of the scene ? Before I could decide whether I should go or stay, the sobbing girl asked me a thousand questions in one breath, "Where do you come from ? Where do you live ? Do you live in Burdwan district ? When are you going back ? Do you know Rajpur ? Do you know Gauri Tiwari of that village ?"

I asked, "Is your home at Rajpur in Burdwan district ?" She wiped her tears with her hand as she answered, "Yes, my father is Gauri Tiwari and my brother's name is Ramlal Tiwari Do you know them ? I have been here in my husband's house for three months now, and I have never heard a word from them Oh, how I long to know how they all are, father and mother, and my brother, and Giribala, and Khoka * You see that *pipal* tree, my sister's husband's house is

* "Baby "

just there She hanged herself last Monday, and the people say, 'No, she died of cholera' "

I was dumbfounded What was the matter? The people with whom the girl was living were natives of Bihar, while she was Bengali How could this be her husband's house, so far out of Bengal? "Why did your sister commit suicide?" I asked her

"She used to cry night and day to go back to Rajpur," she said, "she neither ate nor slept To punish her they tied her hair to a beam in the ceiling to keep her standing day and night So she hanged herself"

"Are your husband's people Biharis?" I asked

"Yes," she said, bursting into tears again, "I can't understand their speech and can't eat their food, and I cry day and night But father never writes to me, and he doesn't take me away from here"

"Why did your father marry you into a family which lived so far away and whose language you do not know?"

"We are Tewaris,* you know," she explained "We can't find anybody to marry us in Bengal"

"Do these people beat you?"

"Don't they? Look at this" Sobbing convulsively, she showed me weals on her arms, back, and cheeks "I shall kill myself like my sister"

My eyes too had grown wet I went out without asking further questions and without waiting for my alms The girl however followed me, saying, "Won't you tell my father? Tell him to take me away or I shall—" I nodded assent and strode rapidly away Her heart-rending appeal continued to ring in my ears

At the turning of the road I saw a grocer's shop Seeing me enter, the grocer stood up to do me honour Though he was surprised to hear me ask for paper, pen, and ink, instead of alms, he supplied

* Originally an up-country Brahmin sect some of whom are settled in Bengal.

them I wrote a letter to Gauri Tiwari, describing all that I had learned, not omitting to mention the news that his elder daughter had committed suicide and that the brutal oppression that the younger girl had been subjected to had made her resolve to put an end to her life in a similar manner Unless he came, I wrote, and did something to relieve her sufferings, nobody could say what kind of fate was in store for her I added that it was most likely that her husband's people here did not allow his letters to reach her I addressed the letter to Rajpur, district Burdwan I do not know whether it ever reached Gauri Tewari, or, if it reached him, what he did afterwards But the whole occurrence was so vividly impressed on my mind, that I still remember every detail of it, and I have not yet got over a feeling of revolt against the caste system, with its fine elaborations, which our model Hindu society harbours in its bosom, and which is the cause of horrors like this

It may be that the caste system has helped Hindu society to survive almost unchanged through centuries It would certainly be foolish to urge its abolition simply because two wretched girls, unable to bear their sufferings, chose to commit suicide But no one who had heard that girl's despairing sobs could resist the question, 'Is mere survival—the preserving intact of a system from generation to generation regardless the cost—the noblest ideal of life ?' Many races, tribes, and systems have succeeded in perpetuating themselves, for instance semi-barbaric people like the *Kukis*, the *Kols*, the *Bhils*, and the *Santhals* in India, while in the great oceans, on many a small island, small tribes have been living since the dawn of history There are ancient tribes in Africa and America who have such strict social laws that the mere mention of them would make our blood run cold In point of age they are older than the oldest ancestors of many European peoples, they are older than ourselves But nobody would dream of raising the question whether their social system on that account are superior to ours Social problems do not appear in the mass, they become apparent in isolated cases, in individual lives Perhaps such a social problem had perplexed the mind of Gauri Tewari when he had to marry his eleven or twelve-year-old girls to Bihari bridegrooms But evidently he had found no solution; and had at length been obliged to sacrifice his two little daughters on the

altar of society I could not feel the slightest pride in a society that could find no room for those two helpless girls, the palsied society which had lost the power of development and growth I once read a scholar assert that our caste system had offered a solution to a great social problem that others had so far not been able to solve Such irrational effusion evoke in me repugnance too deep for words

I left the shop When I returned to our camp after posting my unstamped letter at the post-office, my companions had not yet returned from their rounds I found the *guru* somewhat out of humour "This village is rather cold towards *sadhus* and *sannyasis*," he complained; "the provisions they make for us are anything but satisfactory We must leave to-morrow" "Yes, master," I said approvingly I could no longer conceal from myself the strong desire to see Patna which lurked in my heart

Besides, there was nothing congenial to me in these villages of Bihar I had wandered much in Bengal villages but they bore no resemblance to these places The people, the trees and vegetation, the climate —everything appeared alien to me My whole nature longed day and night to flee from the oppressive exile which had become my portion.

Nowhere could I hear at even-fall the sound of the religious songs and the music of *khols* and *kartals** that can be heard in any village in Bengal, the temple bells at the evening service did not ring as melodiously as ours, and the blowing of conches in the twilight by the women of these parts was not half so pleasing as in my native land What attraction, I asked myself, led people to live here? If I had not seen these villages I should perhaps never have appreciated the sweetness and the romance of our village life in Bengal Our drinking-water was foul, our climate malarious, our systems racked by disease, our wealth and substance wasted by litigation, our villages teeming with factions, and yet there was in it all a charm, a satisfying quality,

* Drums and cymbals

which I began to be dimly aware of, without understanding its exact nature

Next day we struck camp and moved on Our *Sadhu Baba* and his retinue began to advance as quickly as possible towards the seat of Bharadwaj *Muni's* penances But either because the *Baba* wanted to make easy stages or because the holy ascetic had divined my inner longings, we did not camp within twenty miles of Patna That my mind did harbour secret desires I cannot deny 'No harm will be done,' I thought 'I am an old sinner a few days' association with holy people will purify my heart' We camped this time towards twilight at a village called Chhota Baghia, a place some sixteen miles from the nearest railway-station At this village I made the acquaintance of a high-souled Bengali gentleman It would be better for me not to reveal his name, for he is still alive and I know that he would feel embarrassed if I were to publish the many good acts which he has done in secret So, for this narrative, he will be Ram Babu I cannot say what had led him to come to this village nor how he had cone to acquire lands there and to settle down as a gentleman-farmer All I know definitely is that he was living in peace and contentment with a second wife and three or four children

We heard in the morning that smallpox had broken out in Chhota and Bara Baghia, as well as in five or six neighbouring villages As it is during such periods of calamity that *sannyasis* are well served by village-folk, our *Sadhu Baba* made up his mind to remain here for some time

I should like to note here one or two things that I have observed about *sannyasis* I have seen many of them, and mixed intimately with them several times in my life I am not going to extenuate their faults, which are well-known to everybody I will speak of their merits We all know the type who becomes a *sannyasi* purely as a means of livelihood, well, even amongst this class I have always noticed two good qualities. In the first place, their self-restraint, or want of susceptibility, if you will, in all matters relating to the other sex, is surprisingly great, and secondly, their fear of death is as surprisingly small. They follow the maxim, 'While you live, be of good cheer,' without worry-

ing unduly about living long Our *Sadhu Baba* was no exception to this rule

Offerings began to flow in thick and fast in exchange for a thimbleful of ash from our *dhuni* and a few drops of water out of our *sadhu's* water-pot

Ram Babu came with his wife, weeping His eldest son had been suffering from fever for four days and that morning the pox had broken out on his body, a younger son too had been feverish and unconscious all day Seeing that he was a Bengali, I introduced myself to them, and the acquaintance thus started soon ripened into friendship

After we had been in the village for about fifteen days, the *sadhuji* proposed to shift elsewhere The epidemic was then at its height and Ram Babu's wife came weeping to me "*Sannyasi-dada*", she cried, "you are not really a *sannyasi*, your heart must be moved to pity and love My Nabin and Jiten will die if you leave them now Surely you cannot go away and leave us here?" and she caught hold of my feet in respectful entreaty My eyes too had filled with tears Ram Babu joined his wife in her prayers and entreaties, and I could not go I told our *guru*, "My master, do you go ahead If I cannot catch you up on your road, I have no doubt that I shall be able to take the dust of your feet at Prayag" Our *guru* did not view the proposal with favour, but at length, after repeatedly warning me against unnecessary delays on the way, he set off with his retinue, and I went to Ram Bobu's house I had won my *guru's* favour to such an extent that had I persevered, I am sure I should have inherited his pony and his camel after his death But having spurned fortune's profferred gift, it is now fruitless to regret my folly

The two boys recovered from their illness, while the epidemic appeared in its most terrible form People began to flee, young and old, man, woman and child, all without distinction In houses where one saw any trace of human habitation at all one would find only helpless mothers sitting by their stricken children

Ram Babu also loaded his belongings into bullock-carts, a thing he would have done much earlier if his children had not fallen ill

For the past five or six days I had noticed an overpowering lethargy creeping over my limbs and an uncontrollable depression of spirits. This was due, I thought, to the strain of many sleepless nights But one morning my head began to ache, I could eat nothing all day, and in the evening I realised that I had fever That night the family was busy packing up, so there was no rest for anyone Rather late at night Ram Babu's wife came to me and said, "*Sannyasi-dada*, why don't you too come with us as far as Arrah ?"

"Yes, I'll come," I said. "But you will have to give me room in your carts "

"But why, *sannyasi-dada* ? You know we could not get more than two carts there is not room enough even for us "

"I sha'n't be able to walk, my sister," I said, "I've had fever all day "

"Fever ? You don't say so!" she exclaimed horror-stricken, and without waiting for an answer hurriedly left the room

I cannot say how long I slept When I awoke it was day All the other rooms were locked there was not another soul in the house

In front of my room passed the rough road that led to Arrah station At least five or six carts passed by every day, laden with panic-stricken men and women Late one afternoon, after many attempts, I succeeded in getting room in one of them The old Bihari gentleman who kindly took me into his cart let me down early next morning under a tree near the railway-station As I could not even sit up, I lay under the tree A short distance away from me there was an empty tin-shed which had formerly been used as a traveller's waiting room but which now was of little use except as a place of shelter for cattle on a rainy day The old gentleman brought a young Bengali from the station With this young man's assistance and the help of some porters I man-naged to get into the shed

I count it a great misfortune that I am unable to give further details about this young man At the time I was not in a position to ask questions When, a few months later, I had the strength and the opportunity to make enquiries, I learnt that he had died of smallpox

I did however learn from him that he came from East Bengal and was a railway-servant on a pay of fifteen rupees a month When he had helped to put me in the shed he went away and returned presently with a tattered mattress, and at mid-day he brought me a cup of warm milk and made me drink it, saying, "There is nothing to be afraid of, you will be all right" He further said that if I wanted to inform any friend or relation of my illness he would send a telegram for me

I was then in full possession of my faculties, but I felt that I should not retain them much longer I felt that I should lose consciousness if the fever lasted five or six hourse more I had therefore to make up my mind quickly if I wanted to get anything done

But the proposal to inform a friend or relation was embarrassing, I need not explain why It was no use, I thought, making the poor man spend money on a telegram

After dusk he appeared in an interval in his duty with a pot of water and a kerosene-burner My brain was growing confused on account of the fever I called him to me and said, "Please look after me now and then so long as I don't lose consciousness, after that, I don't mind what happens, and please don't you bother either"

He was an extremely tongue-tied young man, he had not the power of adequately expressing his thoughts In reply he could merely say, "No, no," and then stood silent

"You wanted to send news for me," I said "I am a *sannyasi* and have no one to call my own But if you will be so good as to send a postcard to Pyari *Baiji* at Patna, saying that Srikanta is lying dangerously ill in the tin-shed near the Arrah Station,—"

The young man was visibly agitated "I will write at once," he said "I will send both the letter and the telegram," and he left me hurriedly "God," I murmured, "may the news reach her"

When I regained consciousness, I could not make out where I was. Raising my hand to my head I perceived that it lay on ice-bag;

I was lying on a cot in a scantily furnished room. Near me was a stool on which stood a lamp and two or three bottles of medicine, and close by someone was asleep on a rude cot wrapped in a red check cloth. For a long time I could remember nothing. Then memories began to dawn, memories as of dreams in some fitful sleep . the coming and going of many people, being lifted into a litter, my head being shaved, being given medicines, and many other things.

When presently my companion roused himself, I saw that he was a young Bengali of good breeding, not more than eighteen years of age. Just then someone spoke from the head of my bed in a familiar voice.

"Banku," said Pyari, "why don't you change the ice, my son?"

"I am changing it," said the young man. "Can't you get to sleep? When the doctor has said it isn't smallpox, there is nothing to be alarmed about."

"Don't imagine, my child," said Pyari, "that a woman's fears are allayed by a doctor's words! Don't worry about me, Banku. Just change the ice and go to sleep. don't stay awake any longer."

Banku came, changed the ice, and went back to his cot. Soon I could tell by his heavy, regular breathing that he was asleep.

I called out softly, "Pyari."

In an instant she bent over me and wiped the drops of perspiration from my brow with the edge of her *sari*.

"Can you recognise me?" she asked anxiously. "How do you feel now?"

"I feel well. When did you come? Is this Arrah?"

"Yes, we shall go home to-morrow."

"Where to?"

"To Patna. I can't leave you now anywhere outside my house."

"Who is this boy, Rajlakshmi?"

"He is Banku, my step-son. But he is just like my own to me. He stays with me and studies at Patna College. Don't talk any more to-night, sleep. I will tell you everything to-morrow," and she put her hand over my mouth. I seized it, and, taking it in mine, turned on my side and lay still.

XII

RAJLAKSHMI

IT WAS NOT SMALLPOX BUT SOME KIND OF FEVER that had prostrated me As soon as Pyari got the news she had come with Banku, two servants, and her maid She had rented a house at once, and, after removing me to it, had collected all the doctors of the town for a consultation

At dawn Pyari said, "Banku, don't be late, my son, go and reserve a second-class compartment for us I dare not keep him here another hour" Banku's eyes were still heavy with sleep Without opening them he drawled, "What nonsense, Mother How can he be moved in this condition?"

"Get up first, Banku," said Pyari, laughing a little "After you've done that and had your wash, I will discuss the question of moving him Do be a good boy and get up, my son"

Accordingly Banku left his bed, washed, dressed, and went to the station It was morning, there was no one else in the room I called in a low voice, "Pyari" She lay half-asleep on a cot placed at the head of my bed, worn out by her long vigil At the sound of my voice she sat up with a start and bent over me "So you are awake," she said softly

"I have been awake for quite some time"

Pyari passed her hand with anxious care over my head and brow, and said, "There is hardly any fever now Why don't you try to sleep a little?"

"I have been doing nothing else for days, Pyari How long have I had this fever?"

"Thirteen days" She immediately became grave, and said with a seriousness worthy of an elderly matron, "Please don't call me by that name before the boys You used always to call me Lakkhi, why not call me that now?"

I had regained normal consciousness two days before; recalling the attention and care I had received during this period I said, "Very well, Lakkhi. You are trying to move me, but I have given you a lot of trouble already, and I don't want to give you any more"

"What do you want to do then?"

"I think that if I remain here as I am I shall be all right in three or four days more You had better stay here these few days and then go home"

"What will you do then, if I may ask?"

"Something or other"

"I've no doubt," rejoined Pyari with a smile Then coming up and sitting on the edge of my cot, she gazed at me for a few moments, and asked again with a smile, "I know this fever will be cured in eight or ten days, if not in three or four, as you say But will you tell me when you will be cured of your real malady?"

"My real malady? And what may that be, pray?"

"To think one way, to speak another, and to act a third that is the distressing complaint you've been suffering from all your life You know as well as I do that I sha'n't consider you fit to take care of your self for at least a month, and yet you must say, 'I've given you such lot of trouble, leave me!' Dear considerate man, if you really cared much for me, how could you take it into your head to turn a *sannyasi*, and get into all this terrible mess! When I came, I found you lying unconsci on a filthy mattress laid on the bare ground, your head covered with long hair matted with dirt and dust, all your body tricked out with bead and two brass bangles decorating your wrists God, didn't I cry when saw you in such a state!" As she spoke her eyes filled with tears Sh wiped them quickly with her hand and continued, "Banku asked m 'Who is this, mother?' but how could I tell him, this boy who is like own son? Oh, what a dreadful day that was! What an auspicious da

I sometimes think, it must have been when your eyes first met mine at school! The pain you have given me no one else in the wide world has ever given or will give me Now they say the smallpox has broken out in the town, I'll count it great luck if I get away with you all in safety" And she heaved a deep sigh

We left Arrah that night, a young doctor accompanying us as far as Patna, with a chest of medicines In a fortnight's time I recovered almost completely Going through the rooms in Pyari's house one morning I was amazed at the quality of the furnishing This was not the first time that I had visited a house belonging to a singing-girl The furniture here was valuable and elegant, though, considering the part of the town that she lived in, among the newly rich, half-educated Marwaris, it was a wonder she was content with so little In this respect her house bore no resemblance to other houses belonging to women of her profession The impression one usually gets on entering such a house with its numerous candelabras and lamps, pictures, glass cases, and mirrors, is one of cramped overcrowded stuffiness and want of freedom one is afraid even to breathe The innumerable articles which admirers shower as presents so fill the rooms that one is tempted to think that they, like their donors, have to jostle and elbow one another in order to keep their ground But here I did not notice a single superfluous article of furniture, everything appeared to have been selected for the personal use of the owner of the house, and not to have been thrust in as a kind of intrusion, so to speak, of someone else's wanton desire overriding the taste and will of the owner Another thing that attracted attention was that there were no arrangements for singing or music in the house of Pyari, the celebrated singing-girl of Patna Wandering from one room to another, I came at last to the door of a room in one corner of the first floor One glance at the interior was sufficient to show that this was her bed-room But how different from what my imagination had pictured it to be! The floor was of white stone, and the walls shone white and fresh as milk On one side of the room was a small cot behind which stood an iron safe, on the other, a clothes-rack with a few clothes neatly arranged on it nothing else I felt some delicacy in entering the

room with shoes on I left them outside the door and, as my walk had somewhat wearied me, I sat down, absent-mindedly, on her bed,—a thing I should not have done, I am sure, if there had been anything else in the room to serve for a seat Shading the open window in front of me was an enormous *neem* tree, and a gentle breeze was blowing through it As I sat gazing listlessly at it, I must have fallen into a brown study for my attention was suddenly roused by a pleasant sound and looking round I saw that Pyari had entered the room humming a song She had been to bathe in the Ganges, and had come to change her wet clothes She had not yet seen me She went straight to the clothes-rack and was about to take one of the *saris* arranged on it, when I suddenly burst out, "Why don't you take your clothes to the *ghat* with you ?"

She started and then broke out into a smile "Well, I never!" she said "You come into my room like a thief,—no, no, don't get up, don't go—I'll go into the next room and change," and she stepped out lightly with the silk *sari* in her hand She came back in a few minutes with a cheerful face, and asked me with a smile, "You know there is nothing in my room What did you come here to steal ? Are you sure it isn't me ?"

"How can you think me so ungrateful ?" I asked "You have done so much for me, can I now end up by stealing you, of all things ? I hope I am not so covetous "

Pyari's smile faded I had not realised that my words could hurt her I had no wish to cause her pain especially when I was thinking of leaving the place within two or three days With a forced laugh which I hoped would dispel the effect of my unfortunate remark, I said, "But I can't admire your intelligence how can one come to steal a thing that belongs to one already ?"

She was not taken in "Oh well," she said, "you need not demonstrate your gratitude so plainly It is enough for me that you remembered me in your illness "

The thought of having saddened such a fresh, joyous face on that sunny morning brought a pang to my heart Only the passing of

the smile showed what sweetness had lain in it. "Lakhi," I said penitently, hoping to restore that lost sweetness, "you know I have hidden nothing from you, absolutely nothing. If you had not come, I should have lain by the roadside like a corpse, like refuse, for no one would have even thought of sending me to the hospital. Do you remember having asked me to remember you in my day of trouble, if not of happiness? That I did remember earned me a longer lease of life, of that I feel certain."

"Indeed?"

"Quite."

"Then you must admit it's to me you owe your life?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"Then you also must admit that I can claim it as mine, in all fairness?"

"Of course you can. But my life is too insignificant a thing for you to want to claim."

"Well," said Pyari, breaking into laughter, "it's not a bad thing that you know your value after all!" But the next instant she became grave. "Joking apart, now that you are all right, more or less, when do you think you will go?"

At first I did not quite catch her meaning. I answered gravely, "There is no great need for me to go anywhere. So I am thinking of staying here for some time longer."

"But", said Pyari, "my son comes from Bankipore often now-a-days. If you stay much longer he may begin to notice it."

"Let him, then!" I exclaimed. "Surely you are not afraid of his opinion? I tell you, I'am not going to leave all this comfort and luxury before I have to."

"Don't be absurd," said Pyari, cutting me short as she got up and left the room.

Next evening as I lay in an easy chair on the verandah to the west of my room, looking at the sunset, Banku came. I had not before this had an opportunity to talk with him.

"Banku," I asked, motioning him to a chair, "what do you study ?"

He was a very quiet, honest lad "Last year I passed the matric, sir," he said.

"Then you are at the College now ?"

"Yes, sir "

"How many brothers and sisters have you ?"

"I have no brother now, but I've four sisters "

"And are they all married ?"

"Yes, sir, Mother has married them all "

"Is your own mother alive, Banku ?"

"Yes, sir, she lives in our village "

"Has your Mother here ever been there ?"

"Yes, several times, she was there five or six months ago "

"Isn't there any talk about it, any gossip, in your village ?"

Banku sat quiet for a little while and then said, "What if there is ? I'am not going to leave Mother because they've cut us How many of them have got such a mother ?"

The question came to my lips, "How did you learn to love your mother so ?" but I remained silent

"Do you think, sir," Banku went on, "that there is anything wrong in being fond of music ? And that is the only charge they can bring against Mother. She never indulges in scandal and gossip Besides, the sons of some of her worst enemies are getting their education at her expense In winter she gives clothing to a lot of people, and distributes blankets Is there anything wrong in all this, sir ?"

"On the contrary," I said, "it shows great kindness "

"Exactly, sir," Banku agreed, with fresh enthusiasm

"Where would you find so rotten a village as ours, sir ? Why, when our new house was built, my mother, seeing how terribly the people suffered from want of water, thought of converting the brick-

field into a tank She spent three thousand rupees on it, and a fine tank it is, sir, with brick steps leading down to the water But they wouldn't let her dedicate it as a public tank Such fine water, but no one would taste it, touch it Such a rascally set of people they are, sir They are all dying of envy at our fine brick-house Don't you see, sir?"

"Indeed!" I said, affecting surprise "They would suffer terribly and yet not use the water?"

"Exactly, sir," said Banku, smiling "But how long could this state of things go on? In the first year nobody came near the tank But now the poor people and lower castes all use the water, and people of the higher castes take it surreptitiously in summer And yet they didn't let Mother perform the necessary ceremony You little know, sir, how painful this has been to her"

"Well," I said, "this, I suppose, is an instance of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face"

"Exactly, sir!" Banku remarked with great emphasis "It is a blessing to be left alone in such a village don't you think so, sir?"

I merely nodded in reply, without committing myself But that hardly stemmed the tide of Banku's enthusiasm I saw that the boy really loved his step-mother The presence of a good listener gave rein to his tongue, and his unrestrained praise of her began to be almost too much for my patience

At last he suddenly became aware of my long silence,— Feeling embarrassed he tried to change the topic "You are staying on for some time, sir, aren't you?"

"No," I said smiling, "I go to-morrow morning"

"To-morrow, sir? But you are not quite strong yet Do you think that you are completely cured?"

"I thought so this morning," I answered, "now I must think otherwise, for I have had a headache since noon"

"Then why be in such a hurry to go, sir? I hope you are comfortable here?" and he looked at me anxiously I tried to read his meaning from the expression of his face So far as I could read it,

I saw no necessity for concealing the truth Banku was confused, and tried to hide his confusion "Please do not go away so soon," he said

"Why?" I asked

"Mother is most happy while you are here," suddenly he flushed deeply and left me abruptly I saw that though the boy was simple, he was by no means a fool Thinking over his conduct, I understood what Pyari had meant when she said to me, 'He will begin to notice if you stay longer' The boy worshipped her In his eyes she was above reproach his Mother could do no wrong And Pyari was resolved to live up to his ideal of her I saw Pyari in a new light in her adopted guise of mother It was a revelation It was not difficult for me to imagine the ardent longings of Pyari's heart, nor was it, I fancy, a sin to think of her as a free woman in every way, free in every aspect of her life Yet I could see how, the moment she had taken this poor boy as her own son, she had voluntarily renounced a hundred liberties Whatever she might be by herself, however strong and untamed her desires and passions she could no longer forget that a boy now called her his mother, or allow the image of the mother loved and worshipped to be tarnished I did not know who in the first flush of her ardent and passionate youth had been inspired by love to call her 'Pyari' or Beloved, I could only remember how she had wanted to conceal the very name from the boy whom she called her son

The sun went down before my eyes As I sat watching the western sky, my heart suffused with a mellow crimson radiance I realized how narrow, how far from the truth, had been my estimate of Rajlakshmi's character However strictly our mutual relations might preserve an outward semblance of propriety, however discreetly we might try to create around them an atmosphere of gentle affection, there could be no doubt that our desires were rushing headlong to fuse in one fierce, irresistible incandescence But I saw to-day that such a thing was impossible Suddenly, like the towering Himalayas, Banku's Mother stood between us "I must go to-morrow," I said to myself "But let me not, in casting up my accounts, try to keep a balance in my favour There can be no deception or evasion, subtle loopholes I must fade out completely from the picture "

As I sat there in a mood of abstraction, Rajlakshmi crossed the verandah on her way to one of the rooms. In her hand she carried a fuming censer. She paused as she passed me, and said, "You mustn't stay out here in this chill air with a headache. Better go in."

I felt inclined to laugh. "You surprise me, Lakkhi," said I. "There is no chill in the air."

"If there is no chill," she replied, "there is a cold draught. That's not good for you either."

"You are again mistaken. There is no draught either."

"Everything is my mistake," said Rajlakshmi. "But your headache can't be a mistake, I'm sure. Why don't you go in and lie down a bit? What is Ratan upto—? Why can't he put a little eau-de-cologne on your forehead? The servants in this house are the laziest rascals I've ever seen!" and she vanished into the house.

When a crestfallen and contrite Ratan appeared in my room a few minutes later with eau-de-cologne, water, and other accessories, and began a long though humble apology for his negligence, I could not help laughing.

This put some heart into him and he said in a low voice, "Do I not know, sir, that I am not to blame for this? But you don't surely expect one to tell her, sir, that when she is angry she finds fault with everyone in the house?"

"Why is she angry?" I asked.

"Who can tell, sir? It's my belief, sir, that big folk get into a temper for nothing, and get over it for nothing too. God help the servants unless they can make themselves scarce while they are in temper!"

"Why, what do they do then, Ratan,—cut off their heads?" asked a voice suddenly from behind the door. "If big folk's houses are so inconvenient, why don't you go elsewhere?"

Ratan was stricken into shamefaced silence. "What kept you so long, I wonder," she went on. "Srikanta Babu has a headache. I told you about it as soon as I heard it from Banku. And that's why, I suppose,

you come here now, at eight o'clock, and sing my praises Well, you need not remain in this house after to-morrow you can find a job elsewhere Do you understand ?"

When she had gone, poor Ratan applied the eau-de-cologne and water to my forehead and began to fan me Almost immediately Rajlakshmi returned "So you are going home to-morrow ?" she asked

I had made up my mind to go, though not home So I said evasively, "Yes, I'm going to-morrow morning "

"Which train will you go by ?"

"Well, I shall leave in the morning, and take whatever train I can get "

"Very well, I had better send someone to the station to get a time-table," she said, and left me

Ratan finished his task and went away Gradually the household sounds subsided, till at last everything was quiet and I knew that everyone in the house was in bed

But sleep did not come to me One question tormented me What could have annoyed Pyari ? What had I done to make her anxious for my departure ? Ratan had said that big folk got into a temper for nothing, but this certainly could not apply to Pyari She had immense self-control and commonsense, as I had good reason to know Nor could I remember having given expression to anything to which anyone could take exception Whatever might be said about my commonsense, my self-control was in no way less than hers, and I did not believe that it was possible for me, whatever might be my inner impulses, to give utterance to them even in the wildest delirium If, on the other hand, she had herself acted in a way she now regretted she could hardly blame me for it So why should she be angry with me ? Her inexplicable indifference on the eve of my departure hurt and bewildered me

Late at night something roused me, and, opening my eyes, I saw Rajlakshmi enter the room noiselessly, remove the lamp from the table, and put it away near the door so as to shade the light completely from

my eyes The window in front of me was open , she closed it and stood near my bed She seemed to be thinking something over in her mind Then she slipped her hand inside the curtain and felt my forehead, she then unbuttoned my shirt and felt my chest several times She obviously believed me to be asleep , I therefore shrank under her gentle touch with a guilty sense of intrusion upon her privacy I remembered however that it was she who had nursed me back to consciousness during my illness, what was there to make me feel embarrassed ? She then buttoned up my shirt and drew the sheet up to my chin ; finally, she tucked in the curtain and left the room, closing the door softly behind her

I saw and understood She had come and gone in secret I had not forced a revelation, but she could not know how much of herself she left with me in the lonely stillness of the night

In the morning I woke up in a fever My eyes burned and my head ached so badly that leaving the bed was torture Yet I felt that I must go I could no longer trust myself in that house I might break down at any moment And it was not only for my own sake, after all I had to leave Rajlakshmi for her sake of that there could now be no manner of doubt

I saw that she had washed away much of the stain of her past life To-day children had gathered round her as round a mother, and had created a sanctuary by their love and devotion Was I to drag her out of that sanctuary into her own dishonour ? Was such a denouement of a great love to be recorded as a chapter in my life ?

Pyari entered the room "How are you feeling now ?" she asked

"Not too bad," I said "I shall be able to go "

"Must you go to-day ?"

"Yes, I must "

"Well, then, do write as soon as you get home, or we shall be very anxious "

Her imperturbable self-command charmed me "Yes," I said at once, "I shall go home and nowhere else And I will write "